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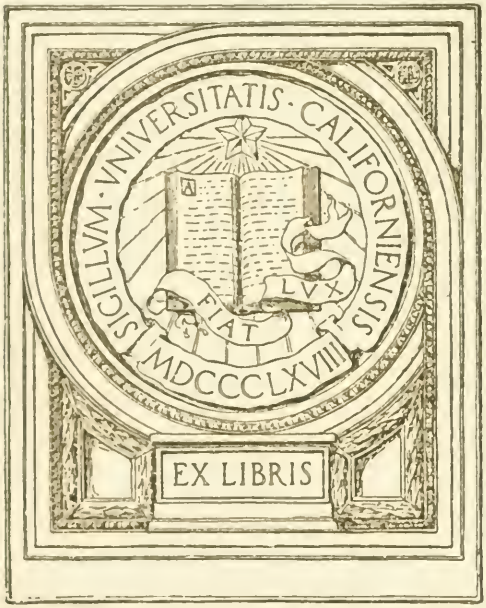

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KATE COVENTRY

My first appearance with the Heavy-top hounds.

KATE COVENTRY

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BY

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY H. M. BROCK

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KATE COVENTRY

KATE COVENTRY

An Autobiography

CHAPTER I

ASCOT

ATE," said aunt Deborah to me, as we sat with our feet on the fender one rainy afternoon — or, as we were in London, I should say one rainy morning—in June, "I think altogether, considering the weather and what not, it would be as well for you to give up this Ascot ex-pedition, my dear."

I own I felt more than half inclined to cry—most girls would have cried—but aunt Deborah says I am very unlike the generality of women; and so, although I had ordered a peach-coloured mantle, and such a bonnet as can only be seen at Ascot on the Cup Day, I kept back my tears,

and swallowed that horrid choking feeling in my throat, whilst I replied, with the most careless manner I could assume, "Goodness! aunt; it won't rain for ever: not that I care; but think what a disappointment for John!"

I must here be allowed the privilege of my sex, to enter on a slightly discursive explanation as to who aunt Deborah is, and who I am, not forgetting cousin John, who is good-nature itself, and without whom I cannot do the least bit. My earliest recollections of aunt Deborah, then, date from a period when I was a curly-headed little thing in a white frock (not so very long ago, after all), and the first occasion on which I can recollect her personality with any distinctness was on a certain birthday, when poor grandfather said to me in his funny way, "Kate, you romp, we must get you a rocking-horse." Aunt Deborah lifted up her hands and eyes in holy horror and deprecation.

"A rocking-horse, Mr. Coventry!" said she; "what an injudicious selection!" (Aunt Deborah likes to round her periods, as the book-people say.) "The child is a sad Tom-boy already, and if you are going to teach her to ride, *I* won't answer for the consequences in after-life, when the habits of our youth have become the second nature of our maturity."

Imagine such sentiments so expressed by a tall austere lady, with high manly features, piercing dark eyes, a *front* of jet-black hair coming low

down on a somewhat furrowed brow. Cousin John says all dark women are inclined to be cross; and I own I think we *blondes* have the best of it as far as good-temper is concerned. My aunt is not altered in the slightest degree from what she was then. She dresses invariably in grey silks of the most delicate shades and texture; carries spectacles low down upon her nose, where they can be of no earthly use except for inspection of the carpet; and wears lavender kid gloves at all hours of the day and night, for aunt Deborah is vain of her hand, and preserves its whiteness as a mark of her birth and parentage. Most families have a crotchet of some sort on which they plume themselves; some will boast that their scions rejoice, one and all, in long noses; others esteem the attenuated frames which they bequeath to their descendants as the most precious of legacies; one would not part with his family squint for the finest pair of eyes that ever adorned an Andalusian maiden; another cherishes his hereditary gout as a priceless patent of nobility; and even insanity is prized in proportion to the tenacity with which it clings to a particular race. So the Horsinghams never cease talking of the Horsingham hand; and if I want to get anything out of aunt Deborah, I have only to lend her a pair of my gloves, and apologise to her for their being so large that she can get both her hands into one.

Now, the only thing we ever fall out about

is what my aunt calls propriety. I had a French governess once, who left because I pinned the tail of cousin John's kite to her skirt, and put white mice in her work-box; and she was always lecturing me about what she called *les convenances.* Aunt Deborah don't speak much French, though she says she understands it perfectly, and she never lets me alone about propriety. When I came home from church that rainy Sunday with Colonel Bingham, under his umbrella (a cotton one), aunt Deborah lectured me on the impropriety of such a thing—though the colonel is forty, if he is a day, and told me repeatedly he was a "safe old gentleman." I didn't think him at all dangerous, I'm sure. I rode a race against Bob Dashwood the other morning, once round the inner ring, down Rotten Row, to finish in front of Apsley House, and beat him all to ribands—wasn't it fun? And didn't I kick the dirt in his face? He looked like a wall that's been fresh plastered when he pulled up. I don't know who told aunt Deborah. It wasn't the coachman, for he said he wouldn't; but she heard of it somehow, and, of course, she said it was improper and unladylike, and even unfeminine, as if anything a woman does can be unfeminine. I know Bob didn't think so, though he got the worst of it every way.

To be sure, we women are sadly kept down in this world, whatever we shall be in the next. If they would only let us try, I think we could

beat the lords of creation, as they call themselves, at everything they undertake. Dear me, they talk about our weakness and vanity;—why, they never know their own minds for two minutes together; and as for vanity, only tell a man you think him good-looking, and he falls in love with you directly; or if that is too great a bounce—and indeed very few of them have the slightest pretensions to beauty—you need only hint that he rides gallantly, or waltzes nicely, or wears neat boots, and it will do quite as well. I recollect perfectly that cousin Emily made her great marriage—five thousand a year and the chance of a baronetcy — by telling her partner in a quadrille, quite innocently, that she should know his figure anywhere. The man had a hump, and one leg shorter than the other; but he thought Emily was dying for him, and proposed within a fortnight. Emily is a heartless creature,—"good common sense," aunt Deborah calls it—and so she threw over Harry Bloomfield and married the hump and the legs that didn't match, and the chance of the baronetcy forthwith; and now they say he beats her, and I think it serves her right.

But we women—gracious! if we only take the trouble, we can turn the whole male sex round our little fingers. Whoever saw half a dozen of *us* hovering, and watching, and fussing round a masculine biped, thankful even to be snubbed rather than not noticed at all? Whoever saw us fetch and carry like so many retrievers, and sit up,

so to speak, for a withered rosebud, at the fag end of an over-blown bouquet? Not that we don't love flowers in their proper places, and *keep* them too, sometimes long after their colour has faded and their perfume gone; but we don't make a parade of such things, and have the grace to be ashamed of ourselves when we are so foolish. But it is quite different with men. They give in to us about everything if we only insist—and it's our own fault if we don't insist; for, of course, if they find us complying and ready to oblige, why there's no end to their audacity. "Give 'em an inch, and they take an ell."

However, they do try to keep us down as much as they can. Now, there's that very exercise of riding that they are so proud of. They get us a side-saddle, as they call it, of enormous weight and inconvenience, on which they plant pommels enough to impale three women; they place us in an attitude from which it is next to impossible to control a horse should he be violent, and in a dress which ensures a horrible accident should he fall, added to which, they constantly give us the worst quadruped in the stable; and yet, with all these drawbacks, such is our own innate talent and capacity, we ride many an impetuous steed in safety and comfort that a man would find a dangerous and uncontrollable mount. For my part, I only wish I had been born a man—that's to say, if I could keep my own ideas and feelings. To be sure, I should lose a good many personal adornments; not that I'm vain

enough to consider myself a beauty, but still one cannot help being anxious about one's own appearance, particularly if one has a full-length glass in one's bedroom. I need not be ashamed to own that I know I've got bright eyes, and good teeth, and a fresh colour, and loads of soft brown hair, and not a bad figure—so my dressmaker tells me; though I think myself I look best in a riding-habit. Altogether you can't call that a perfect fright; but, nevertheless, I think if I might I would change places with cousin John. He has no aunt Deborah to be continually preaching propriety to him. He can go out when he likes without being questioned, and come in without being scolded. He can swagger about wherever he chooses without that most odious of encumbrances called a chaperon; and though I shouldn't care to smoke as many cigars as he does (much as I like the smell of them in the open air), yet I confess it must be delightfully independent to have a latch-key.

I often wonder whether other people think cousin John good-looking. I have known him so long, that I believe I can hardly be a fair judge. He is fresh-coloured, to be sure, and square, and rather fat, and when he smiles, and shows all his white teeth, he has a very pleasant appearance; but I think I admire a man who looks rather more of a *roué* — not like Colonel Bingham exactly, whose face is all wrinkles and whiskers, but a little care-worn and jaded, as if he was accustomed to difficulties, and had other things to occupy his

thoughts besides his horses and his dinner. I don't like a man that stares at you; and I don't like a man that can't look you in the face. He provokes me if he is all smiles, and I've no patience with him if he's cross. I'm not sure I know exactly what does please me best, but I do know that I like cousin John's constant good-humour, and the pains he takes to give me a day's amusement whenever he can, or what he calls "have cousin Kate out for a lark"; and this brings me back to aunt Deborah and the expedition to Ascot, a thing of all others I fancied was so perfectly delightful.

"My dear," said aunt Deborah, as she folded her lavender-gloved hands, "if it wasn't for the weather and my rheumatism, I'd accompany you myself; but I do consider that Ascot is hardly a place for *my* niece to be seen at without a chaperon, and with no other protector than John Jones — John Jones," repeated the old lady reflectively, "an excellent young man, doubtless—I heard him his Catechism when he was so high—but still hardly equal to so responsible a charge as that of Miss Coventry."

I knew this was what John calls a back-hander at me, but I can be so good-tempered when I have anything to gain, therefore I only said—

"Well, aunt, of course you are the best judge, and I don't care the least about going; only when John calls this afternoon, you must explain it all to him, for he's ordered the carriage, and the luncheon, and everything, and he'll be *so* disappointed."

I've long ago found out that if you want to do anything, you should never seem too anxious about it.

Aunt Deborah is fonder of John than she likes to confess. I know why, because I overheard my old nurse tell the housekeeper when I was quite a little thing; and what I hear, especially if I'm not intended to hear it, I never forget. There were three Miss Horsinghams, all with white hands—poor mamma, aunt Deborah, and aunt Dorcas. Now aunt Deborah wanted to marry old David Jones (John's papa). I can just remember him—a snuffy little man with a brown wig, but perhaps he wasn't always so; and David Jones, who was frightened at aunt Deborah's black eyes, thought he would rather marry aunt Dorcas. Why the two sisters didn't toss up for him, I can't think; but he did marry aunt Dorcas, and aunt Deborah has been an old maid ever since. Sometimes even now she fixes her eyes on cousin John, and then takes them off with a great sigh. It seems ridiculous in an old lady, but I don't know it is so. That's the reason my cousin can do what he likes with aunt Deborah; and that's the reason why, when he called on that rainy afternoon, he persuaded her to let me go down to Ascot with him all alone by our two selves the following day.

How pleasant it is to wake on the morning of a gala-day; to hear the carts and cabs rumbling and clattering in the streets, and to know that you must get up early, and be off directly after break-

fast, and will have the whole lifelong day to amuse yourself in. What a bright sunshiny morning it was, and what fun I had going with John in a hansom cab, to Paddington!—I like a hansom cab, it goes so fast—and then down to Windsor by the train, in a carriage full of such smart people, some of whom I knew quite well by name, though not to speak to—the slang aristocracy, as they are called, muster in great force at Ascot. Nor could anything be more delightful than the drive through Windsor Forest up to the course—such a neat phaeton and pair, and John and I like a regular Darby and Joan sitting side by side. Somehow that drive through Windsor Forest made me think of a great many things I never think of at other times. Though I was going to the races, and fully prepared for a day of gaiety and amusement, a half-melancholy feeling stole over me as we rolled along amongst those stately old trees, and that lovely scenery, and those picturesque little places set down in that abode of beauty. I thought how charming it would be to saunter about here in the early summer mornings, or the still summer nights, and listen to the thrush and the blackbird and the nightingale in the copse, and then I thought I would not care to wander here *quite* alone, and that a whisper might steal on my ear, sweeter than the note of the thrush and the nightingale; and that there might be a somebody without whom all that sylvan beauty would be a blank, but with whom any place would become a fairyland. And

then I fell to wondering who that somebody would be, and I looked at cousin John, and felt a little cross — which was very ungrateful, and a little disappointed—which was very unjust.

"Here we are, Kate: that's the Grand Stand, and we'll have the carriage right opposite; and the Queen's not come, and we're in heaps of time; and there's Frank Lovell," exclaimed the unconscious John, as we drove on to the course, and my day-dreams were effectually dispelled by the gay scene which spread itself before my eyes.

As I took John's arm, and walked into the enclosure in front of the stand, I must confess that the first impression on my mind was this—"never in my life have I seen so many well-dressed people collected together before;" and when the Queen drove up the course, with her brilliant suite of carriages and out-riders, and the mob of gentlemen and ladies cheered her to the echo, I was such a goose that I felt as if I could have cried. After a time I got a little more composed, and looked about at the different toilettes that surrounded me. I own I saw nothing much neater than my own; and I was pleased to find it so, as nothing gives one greater confidence in a crowd than the consciousness of being well dressed. But what I delighted in more than all the bonnets and gowns in the universe were those dear horses, with their little darlings of jockeys. If there is one thing I like better than another, it is a thoroughbred horse. What a gentleman he looks amongst the

rest of his kind! How he walks down the course, as if he knew his own value—self-confident, but not vain; and goes swinging along in his breathing-gallop as easily and as smoothly as if I was riding him myself, and he was proud of his burthen! When Colonist won the Cup, I felt again as if I could have cried. It was a near race, and closely contested the whole way from the distance in. I felt my blood creeping quite chill, and I could perfectly understand then the infatuation men cherish about racing, and why they ruin their wives and children at that pursuit. What a relief it was when the number was up, and I could be quite satisfied that the dear bay horse had won. As for the little jockey that rode him, I could and *would* have kissed him! Just then cousin John came back to me, with his sunny, laughing face, and I naturally asked him, "had he won his money?" John never bets; but he replied, "I'm just as pleased as if I'd won a fortune; only think, Frank Lovell has landed twelve hundred!"—

"Well," I replied, "I am glad of it, which is very good of me, seeing that I don't know Mr. Lovell"—

"Don't know Frank Lovell!" exclaimed John. "The greatest friend I have in the world." (Men's friends always are the greatest in the world.) "I'll introduce him to you; there he is: no, he isn't. I saw him a moment ago."

And forthwith John launched into a long biography of his friend Frank Lovell: how that

gentleman was the nicest fellow, and the finest rider, and the best shot in the universe; how he knew more about racing than any man of his age, and had been in more difficulties, and got out of them better, and robbed the public generally with a more plausible air: how he sang a capital song, and was the pleasantest company, and had more brains than the world gave him credit for (as indeed might easily be the case); how he was very good-looking and very agreeable, and met with great success (whatever that means) in society; how Lady Scapegrace was avowedly in love with him; and he had thrown over pretty Miss Pinnifer, because he wouldn't leave the army, and six months afterwards was obliged to sell his commission when Outsider won the Two Thousand; together with various other details, which lasted till it was time to have luncheon, and go back to Windsor to catch the four o'clock train. Though evidently such a hero of John's, I confess, I didn't like what I heard of Frank Lovell at all.

CHAPTER II

ROTTEN ROW

WE'VE got such a sweet little house in Lowndes Street, to my mind the very best situation in London. When I say *we*, of course I mean aunt Deborah and myself. We live together, as I hope we always shall do, as aunt Deborah says, till one of us is married. And notwithstanding the difference of our ages we get on as comfortably as any two forlorn maidens can. Though a perfect fairy-palace within, our stronghold is guarded by no giant, griffin, dragon, or dwarf; nothing more frightful than a policeman, whose measured tread may be heard at the midnight hour pacing up and down beneath our windows.

"It's a great comfort," says aunt Deborah, "to know that assistance is close at hand. I'm a lone woman, Kate, and I confess to feeling nervous when I lie awake."

I quite agree with my aunt, though I am not nervous; but I must say I like the idea of being watched over during the hours of sleep, and there is something romantic in hearing the regular tramp

of the sentinel whilst one is curled up snug in bed. I don't much think it always *is* the policeman—at least I know that one night when I got up to peep if it was a constable, he was wrapped in a very loose cloak, such as is by no means the uniform of the force, and was besides, unquestionably, smoking a cigar, which I am given to understand is not permitted by the regulations when on duty. I watched the glowing light for at least ten minutes, and when I went to bed again, I could not get to sleep for wondering who the amateur policeman could be.

But the house is a perfect jewel of its kind; such a pretty dining-room, such a lovely drawing-room, opening into a conservatory, with a fountain and gold-fish, to say nothing of flowers (I am passionately fond of flowers), and such a boudoir of my own, where nobody ever intrudes except my special favourites—cousin John, for instance, when he is not in disgrace—and which I have fitted up and furnished quite to my own taste. There's the "Amazon" in gilt bronze, and a bas-relief from the Elgin Marbles—not coloured like those flaxen-haired abominations at Sydenham, but pure and simple as the taste that created it; and an etching Landseer did for me himself of my little Scotch terrier growling; and a veritable original sketch of Horace Vernet, in which nothing is distinguishable save a phantom charger, rearing straight up amongst clouds of smoke. Then I've put up a stand for my riding-whips, and a picture of

my own thoroughbred favourite horse over the chimney-piece; altogether aunt Deborah describes the apartment exactly, when she says to me, as she does about once a week, "My dear, if you were a man, I should say your room was fitted up in the most perfect taste; but as you happen to be a young lady, I won't say what I think, because I know you won't agree with me"; and I certainly do not agree with aunt Deborah upon a great many subjects.

However, there's no situation like Lowndes Street. I'm not going to tell the number, nor at which end of the street we live; for it's very disagreeable to have people riding by and stopping to alter their stirrup-leathers, and squinting up at one's drawing-room windows, where one sits working in peace, and then cantering off and trotting by again, as if something had been forgotten. No; if curiosity is so very anxious to know where I live, let it look in the *Court Guide*; for my part, I say nothing, except that there are always flowers in the balcony; and there's no great singularity about that. But there are two great advantages connected with a residence in Belgravia, which I wonder are not inserted in the advertisements of all houses to let in that locality. In the first place, a lady may walk about all the forenoon quite alone without being hampered by a maid or hunted by a footman; and in the second, she is most conveniently situated for a morning ride or walk in the Park; and those

are about the two pleasantest things one does in London.

Well, the same conversation takes place nearly every morning at breakfast, between aunt Deborah and myself (we breakfast early, never after half-past nine, however late we may have been the night before). Aunt Deborah begins—

"My dear, I hope we shall have a quiet morning together; I've directed the servants to deny me to all visitors; and if you get your work, I will proceed with my readings from excellent Mrs. Hannah More."

Kate.—"Thank you, aunt; Hannah More amuses me very much" (I confess that prim moralist does make me laugh).

Aunt Deborah (reprovingly). —"Instructive, Kate, not amusing; certainly not ludicrous. If you'll shut the door, we'll begin."

Kate.—"Can't we put it off for an hour? I must get my ride, you know, aunt. What's the use of horses if one don't ride?"

Aunt Deborah.—"Kate, you ride too much; I don't object to the afternoons with John Jones, but these morning scampers are really quite uncalled for: they're spoiling your figure and complexion; it's improper—more, it's unfeminine: but as you seem determined upon it, go and get your ride, and come back a little sobered;" and Kate—that's me—disappears into the boudoir, from which she emerges in about five minutes with the neatest habit and the nicest hat, and

her hair done in two such killing plaits—John Jones says I never look so well as when I've got my hair dressed for riding.

I always go out for these morning excursions accompanied by the coachman, an old family servant, and I soon knock *him* up completely. In the first place, the Ride is always soft, and I hate going slow, so he gets a dreadful stitch in his side trying to keep up with me on one of the high-actioned coach-horses; then, he don't see the fun of having two horses to clean when he gets home, instead of one; so I soon get far ahead of that excellent and pursy old man. After all, I ought to be able to take care of myself. I have ridden ever since I was five years old; and if habit is second nature, as aunt Deborah says, I'm sure my habit ought to be natural enough to me. I recollect as well as if it were yesterday, when poor papa put me on a shaggy Shetland pony, and telling me not to be frightened, gave it a thump, and started me off by myself. I wasn't the least bit afraid, I know that. It was a new sensation, and delightful; round and round the field we went, I shaking my reins with one hand, and holding on a great flapping straw-hat with the other, the pony grunting and squeaking, with his mane and tail floating on the breeze, and papa standing in the middle, waving his hat and applauding with all his might. After that, I was qualified to ride anything; and by the time I was twelve, there wasn't a hunter in the stables

that I wouldn't get on at a moment's notice. I am ashamed to confess that I have even caught the loose cart-horses in a field, and ridden them without saddle or bridle. I never was beat but once, and that was at uncle Horsingham's, when I was about fifteen. He had bought a mare at Tattersall's for his daughter to ride, and brought her down to Dangerfield, thinking she would conduct herself like the rest of her species. How well I remember my governess's face when she gave me leave to go to the stable with Sir Harry, and look over the new purchase. I was a great pet of uncle Horsingham's; and as cousin Amelia was not much of an equestrian, he proposed that I should get upon the chestnut mare first, and try her paces and temper before his daughter mounted her. As we neared the stables, out came one of the grooms with a side-saddle on his head, and the longest face I ever beheld.

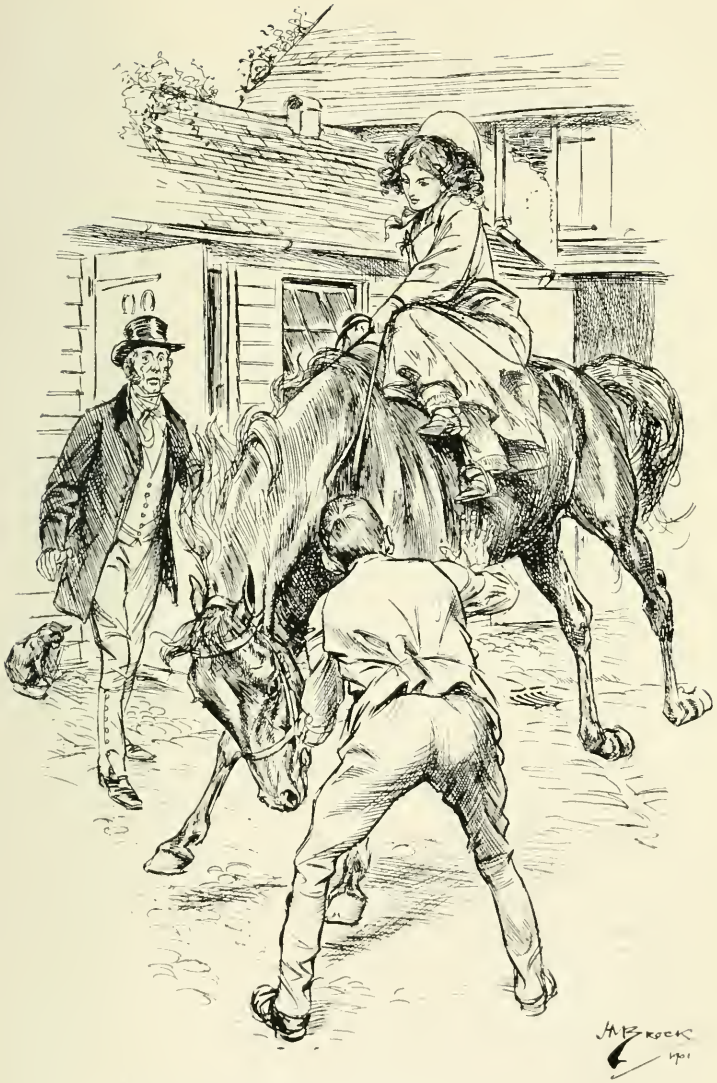
"Oh! Sir 'Arry," said he—I quote his exact words—"that new mare's a wicious warmint: afore I was well in the stable, she ups and lets out at me just above the knee: I do believe as my thigh's broke."

"Nonsense, man," said my uncle: "put the saddle on, and bring her out."

Presently the chestnut mare appeared; and I saw at once that she was not in the best of humours. But I was young, full of spirits, and fresh from lessons; so fearing if one of the men should venture to mount her she might show

temper, and I should lose my ride, I made a sign to the head-groom to give me a hand; and, before my uncle had time to exclaim, "For goodness' sake, Kate!" I was seated, muslin dress and all, on the back of the chestnut mare. What she did, I never could quite make out; it seemed to me that she crouched as if she were going to lie down, and then bounded into the air, with all four legs off the ground. I was as near gone as possible; but for the only time in my life, I caught hold of the pommel with my right hand, and that saved me. In another instant she had broke from the groom's hold, and was careering along the approach like a mad thing. If I had pulled at her in the least, she would have run away with me.

Luckily, the park was roomy, and the old trees far apart; so when we got upon the grass, I knew who would be mistress. I gave her a rousing good gallop, shook my reins and patted her, to show her how confident I was, and brought her back to my uncle as quiet as a lamb. Unfortunately, however, the mare had taken a dislike to certain stone pillars which supported the stable gates, and nothing would induce her to pass them. Flushed with success, I borrowed my uncle's riding-whip to punish her; and now began a battle in good earnest. She reared and plunged, and wheeled round and round, and did all she knew to get rid of me; whilst I flogged and jerked, and screamed at her (I didn't swear, because I didn't know how), and vowed in my wicked little heart I would be



"I was as near gone as possible"

killed rather than give in. During the tussle, we got nearer and nearer to a certain large pond, about a hundred yards from the stable gates, at which the cattle used to water in the quiet summer afternoons. I knew it wasn't very deep, for I had seen them standing in it often. By the time we were close on the brink, the whole household had turned out to see "Miss Kate killed"; and just as I hit the mare a finishing cut over the ears, I caught a glimpse of my governess in an attitude of combined shame, horror, and disgust, that I shall never forget. The next moment we were overhead in the pond, the mare having dashed blindly in, caught her fore-feet in the bridle, and rolled completely over. What a ducking I got, to be sure; but it was nothing to the scolding I had to endure afterwards from all the females of the family, including my governess; only uncle Horsingham stuck up for me, and from that time till the day of his death, vowed he had "never known but one plucky fellow in the world, and that was his little niece, Kate."

No wonder I feel at home on Brilliant, who never did wrong in his life, who will eat out of my hand, put his foot in my apron-pocket, follow me about like a dog, and is, I am firmly persuaded, the very best horse in England. He is quite thoroughbred, though he has never been in training —and is as beautiful as he is good. Bright bay, with such black legs, and such a silky mane and tail! I know lots of ladies whose hair is coarser

than Brilliant's. Fifteen hands three inches, and cousin John says well up to his weight—an honest fourteen stone. With the smallest nose, and the leanest head, and the fullest dark eye, and the widest, reddest nostril, his expression of countenance, when a little blown, is the most beautiful I ever beheld; and not a white mark about him, except a tiny star in the very middle of his forehead; I know it well, for I have kissed it often and often. The picture over my chimney-piece does not half do him justice; but then, to be sure, its *pendant*, painted by the same artist, and representing my other horse, White Stockings, flatters that very plain and excellent animal most unblushingly.

Of all delights in the world, give me my morning canter up the Park on Brilliant. Away we go, understanding each other perfectly; and I am quite sure that he enjoys as much as I do the bright sunshine, and the morning breeze, and the gleaming Serpentine, with its solitary swan, and its hungry ducks, and its amphibious dogs continually swimming for the inciting stick, only rescued to produce fresh exertions; and the rosy children taking their morning walk; and, above all, the *liberty* of London before two o'clock in the day when the real London begins. I pat Brilliant's smooth, hard neck, and he shakes his head, and strikes an imaginary butterfly with one black foreleg, and I draw my rein a thought tighter, and away we go, much to the admiration of that

good-looking man with moustachios who is leaning on his umbrella close to the rails, and smoking the cigar of meditation, as if the Park was his own.

I often wondered who that man was. Morning after morning I have seen him at the same place, always with an umbrella and always with a cigar. I quite missed him on the Derby-day, when of course he was gone to Epsom (by the bye, why don't we go to the Derby just as much as to Ascot?); and yet it was rather a relief, too, for I had got almost shy about passing him; it seemed so absurd to see the man every day and never to speak; besides, I fancied, though of course it could only be fancy, that he looked as if he were expecting me. At last I couldn't help blushing, and I thought he saw it; for I'm sure he smiled, and then I was so provoked with myself, that I sent Brilliant up the Ride at a pace nothing short of a race-horse could have caught.

CHAPTER III

LADY HORSINGHAM'S BALL

I WONDER whether any lady in England has a maid who, to use that domestic's own expression, is capable of giving satisfaction. If any lady does rejoice in such an Abigail, I shall be too happy to swap with her, and give anything else I possess, except Brilliant, into the bargain. Mine is the greatest goose that ever stood upon two legs, and how she can chatter as she does with her mouth full of pins, is to me a perfect miracle. Once or twice in the week I have to endure a certain ordeal, which, although a positive pleasure to some women, is to my disposition intense martyrdom, termed dressing to go out; and I think I never hated it more than the night of Lady Horsingham's ball. Lady Horsingham is my poor uncle's widow; and as aunt Deborah is extremely punctilious on all matters relating to family connections, we invariably attend these solemnities with a gravity befitting the occasion.

Now I may be singular in my ideas; but I confess that it does appear to me a strange way of enjoying one's self in the dog-days, to make one's

toilette at eleven p.m. for the purpose of sitting in a carriage till twelve, and struggling on a staircase amongst a mob of one's fellow-creatures till half-past. After fighting one's way literally step by step, and gaining a landing by assault, one looks round and takes breath, and what does one see? Panting girls looking in vain for the right partner, who is probably not ten yards from them, but wedged in between substantial dowagers, whom he is cursing in his heart, but from whom there is no escape, or perhaps philosophically and perfidiously making the best of his unavoidable situation, and flirting shamefully with the one he likes *next* best to the imprisoned maiden on the staircase; or, the tables turned, young fledglings pining madly for their respective enslavers, and picturing to themselves how she may be even now whirling round to that pealing waltz in the arms of some former adorer, or delightfully new acquaintance, little heeding him who is languishing in his white neckcloth, actually within speaking distance, but separated as effectually as if he were in another country. By the bye, it's fatal when people begin to think of each other as he's and she's; the softest proper name that ever was whispered is not half so dangerous as those demonstrative pronouns. In one corner is a stout old gentleman, wedged against the wall, wiping the drops from his bald head, and wondering what Jane and Julia can see in these gatherings to make them wild about going to every ball for which they can get an invitation,

Deluded father! both Jane and Julia have the best of reasons in this very house. You grudge not to spend a broiling September day in the pursuit of *your* game: each of your fair daughters, sir, flatters herself that she, too, has winged her bird.

Swaying backwards and forwards in the mass, like some goodly merchantman at anchor, pitching and rolling to a ground-swell, behold the chaperon fulfilling her destiny, and skilfully playing that game which to her is the business of life. Flushed and hot in person, she is cool and composed in mind. Practice makes perfect: and the chaperon is as much at home here as the stockbroker on 'Change, or the betting-man in the ring, or the fisherman amidst the roar and turmoil of the waves. With lynx eyes she notes how Lady Carmine's eldest girl is carrying on with young Thriftless, and how Lord Looby's eyeglass is fixed on her own youngest daughter; yet for all this, she is not absent or preoccupied, but can whisper to stupid Lady Dulwich the very latest intelligence of a marriage, or listen, all attention, to the freshest bit of scandal from Mrs. General Gabbler. But perhaps by this time you have floated with the tide into the doorway, and received from your hostess the cordial shake of the hand or formal bow which makes you free of the place. So with patience and perseverance you work your way at last into the dancing-room, and you now see what people come here for; dancing, of course: each performer has about eighteen inches of stand-

"Brushing away the while at my back hair"

ing-room, and on that space must be enacted in hopeless pantomime the intricate evolutions of the quadrille, or the rotatory struggles of the waltz. Sliding and smiling, and edging and crushing, the conscientious dancers try to fulfil their duties, and much confusion and begging of pardons are the natural results.

However, it's a rare place for love-making. What with the music, and the crowd, and the confusion, the difficulty is more to make out what one's partner does say, than to prevent his being overheard by other people; but, I must confess, if anybody had anything very particular to say to me, I had rather hear it in the quiet country by moonlight, or even coming home from Greenwich by water, or anywhere, in short, rather than in the turmoil of a London ball. But that's all nonsense; and I hope I have too much pride to allow any man to address me in such a strain. Trust me for setting him down!

It's no wonder, then, that I was cross when I was dressing for Lady Horsingham's ball; and that silly Gertrude (that's my maid's name, and what a name it is for a person in that class of life!) put me more and more out of patience with her idiot conversation, which she tries to adapt to my tastes, and of which the following is a specimen :—

"Master John will be at her ladyship's ball, miss, I make no doubt;" brushing away the while at my back hair, and pulling it unnecessarily hard: no maid ever yet had a light hand.

No answer. What business is it of hers, and why should she call him Master John? Gertrude tries again; "You look pale to-night, miss—you that generally has such a colour. I'm afraid you're tired with your ride."

"Not a bit of it—only sleepy. Why, it's time one was in bed."

"Lor, miss, I shouldn't want to go to bed, not if I was going to a ball. But I think you like 'orse exercise best; and to be sure, your 'orse is a real beauty, Miss Kate."

The very name of Brilliant always puts me in good humour, so, of course, I can but answer, "That he is, Gertrude, and as good as he's handsome"; on which my voluble handmaid goes off again at score.

"That's what I say, miss, when I see him coming round to the door, with his long black tail, and his elegant shape, and his thin legs."

Thin legs! I can't stand that; to hear my beautiful Brilliant's great strong legs called thin, as if he were made of paper. I feel I am getting savage again, so I cut Gertrude short, and bid her finish my hair, and hasten my dressing, for aunt Deborah don't take long, and we shall be late for the ball. At the mention of the word "ball," off goes Gertrude again.

"What a grand ball it'll be, miss, as all her ladyship's is; and I know there'll be no young lady there as will be better dressed than my young lady, nor better looking neither; and I'm sure to see you

and Master John stand up together, as you did last Christmas, when we was all at Dangerfield! and I says to the steward, 'Mr Musty,' says I, 'a handsomer couple than them two I never clapped eyes on. Master John, he looks so fresh, and so healthy and portly, as becomes a gentleman.' And he says, 'No doubt,' says he; 'and Miss Kate, she steps away like a real good one, with her merry eyes and her trim waist, as blooming,' says he, 'as a bean-field, and as saucy as' "—

"There, that will do, Gertrude; now my pocket-handkerchief and some scent, and my gloves and my fan. Good-night, Gertrude."

"Good-night, miss; I do humbly hope you'll enjoy your ball."

Enjoy my ball, indeed! How little does the girl know what I enjoy, and what I don't enjoy! Lady Horsingham will be as stiff as the poker, and about as communicative. Cousin Amelia will look at everything I've got on, and say the most disagreeable things she can think of, because she never can forgive me for being born two years later than herself. I shall know very few people, and those I do know I shall not like. I shall have a headache before I have been half an hour in the room. If I dance I shall be hot, and if I don't dance I shall be bored. Enjoy my ball, indeed! I'd much rather be going hay-making.

Up went the steps, bang went the door, and ere long we were safely consigned to the string of carriages bound for the same destination as our-

selves. After much cutting in and shaving of wheels and lashing of coach-horses, with not a little blasphemy, "Miss Horsingham" and "Miss Coventry" were announced in a stentorian voice, and we were struggling in a mass of silks and satins, blonde and broadcloth, up the swarming staircase. Everything happened exactly as I had predicted; Lady Horsingham accosted aunt Deborah with the most affectionate cordiality, and lent me two fingers of her left hand, to be returned without delay. Cousin Amelia looked me well over from head to foot, and asked after my own health and Brilliant's with a supercilious smile. How that girl hates me! and I honestly confess to returning the feeling with some cordiality. As far as appearance goes, I think without vanity I may say I have the best of it, cousin Amelia being very short and pale, with a turn-up nose and long ringlets. Why does a little woman with a turn-up nose always wear her hair in ringlets? Is it that she wishes to resemble a King Charles's spaniel? And why are our sex so apt to cherish feelings of animosity towards those who are younger and better-looking than themselves? While I asked myself these questions, I was suddenly accosted by a lady who had been some time in conversation with my chaperon, and from whom, I saw, by aunt Deborah's countenance, she was anxious to make her escape. Poor old soul! What could she do? a double rank of dowagers hemmed her in in front; on one side of her was her unwelcome acquaintance and the banisters,—on

the other, myself and three demure young ladies (sisters), who looked frightened and uncomfortable, —whilst her rear was guarded by a tall cavalry officer with enormous moustachios, heading an impervious column of dandies worse than himself. Aunt Deborah was like a needle in a bottle of hay. Taking advantage of her position, the lady beforementioned seized me by both hands, and vowed she should have known me anywhere by my likeness to my poor mamma.

"I must make your acquaintance, my dear Miss Coventry—your uncle, Sir Harry, was one of my oldest friends. I see you so often in the Park, and you ride the nicest horse in London, a bay with a white star."

Of course I bowed an affirmative, and shook my new friend by the hand with a cordiality equal to her own. A conversation begun in so promising a manner as by a reference to my favourite was sure to go on swimmingly; besides, we could not have got away from each other if we would; and ere long I found Mrs. Lumley—for that was the lady's name—a most amusing and satirical personage, with a variety of anecdotes about all her friends and acquaintance, and a sort of flippant charm of manner that was quite irresistible.

Besides all this, she was doubtless a very pretty woman—less striking perhaps than winning. At the first glance you hardly remarked her—at the second you observed she was very well dressed—at the third it occurred to you all of a sudden that

she was far better looking than half the regular red-and-white beauties of the season ; and after five minutes' conversation, all the men were over head and ears in love with her. She was neither dark nor fair—neither pale nor ruddy—neither short nor tall. I never could succeed in making out the colour of her eyes, but she had wonderfully long thick eyelashes with a curl in them (I wish mine had been cut when I was a baby), and a beautiful healthy looking skin, and such good teeth. After all, I think her great attraction was her nose. It had more expression in its straight, well-cut bridge, and little sharp point, than all the rest of her features put together. I believe it was her nose that conquered everything, and that her small feet, and pretty figure, and white hands, and dashing ways, and *piquante* conversation, had much less to answer for than that one saucy little feature. How she rattled on!

"You don't know Lady Scapegrace, Miss Coventry, do you? There, that bold-looking woman in yellow. Beautiful black hair, hasn't she?—false every bit of it! She'll bow to me to-night, because she sees me with your good aunt; there, I told you so! Since she and Sir Guy are living together again she sets up for being respectable—such stories, my dear! but I don't believe half of 'em. However, I've seen her with my own eyes do *the oddest* things—at best, I'm afraid she's a shocking flirt! There's your cousin, Mr. Jones: —you see I know everybody: how black he looks—

he don't like me—a great many people don't,—but I return good for evil—I like everybody—it's never worth while to be cross;" and as she said so she smiled with such a sunny, merry expression that I liked her better and better.

Cousin John certainly did look very cross.

"Who introduced you to that horrid woman, Kate?" said he, as soon as a fresh convulsion in the crowd had stranded us a few steps higher up, and we were separated from Mrs. Lumley and her attractions.

"My aunt, sir," I replied, demurely, telling a "white one" for the sake of teasing him. "Why? Have you any objections?"

"Oh, of course, if my aunt did, it's all right," replied he. "I don't know a great deal of her, and what I do know I don't much like. But, Kate, there's a friend of mine wishes to be presented to you. You've often heard me mention Frank Lovell—well, there he is: do you see him?—turning round now to speak to Lady Scapegrace."

Good Heavens! it was the man I had seen in the Park so often, if possible, better-looking with his hat off than I had thought him in his morning costume, with the eternal cigar in his mouth. I have a sort of dim recollection of his making his bow to my aunt, who received him as she does all good-looking young men, with a patronising smile, and a vision of John "doing the polite," and laughing as he ceremoniously introduced "Captain Lovell" and "Miss Coventry," and something said

about "the honour of the next waltz"; and, although I am not easily discomposed, I confess I felt a little shy and uncomfortable till I found myself hanging on Captain Lovell's arm, and elbowing our way to a place amongst the dancers.

I must say he wasn't the least what I expected—not at all forward, and never alluded to our previous meeting, or to Brilliant, till we went to have an ice in the tea-room, when Captain Lovell began to enlarge upon the charm of those morning rides, and the fresh air, and the beautiful scenery of Hyde Park; and though I never told him exactly, he managed to find out that I rode every day at the same early hour, even after a ball! and that I was as likely to be there to-morrow as any day in the week; and so we had another turn at "the Colombetta" waltz, and he took me back to my aunt, half inclined to be pleased with him, and more than half inclined to be angry with myself. I am afraid I couldn't help watching him as he loitered about amongst the crowd, now deep in conversation with Lady Scapegrace, now laughing with my new friend, Mrs. Lumley. He looked so like a gentleman, even amongst all the high-bred men there; and though so handsome, he didn't appear the least conceited. I began to wonder whether all could be true that I had heard of him, and to think that a man who liked such early walks could not possibly be the *roué* and good-for-nothing they made him out. I was roused out of a brown study by cousin John's voice in my ear,—"Now

then, Kate, for *our* waltz. The room's a little clearer, so we can go the pace if you like." And away we went to "the Odalisque" faster than any other couple in the room. Somehow it wasn't half such a pretty air as the Colombetta, and John, though he has a very good ear, didn't seem to waltz quite so well as usual: perhaps I was getting a little tired. I know I wasn't at all sorry when my aunt ordered the carriage; and I thought the dawn never looked so beautiful as it did when we emerged from those hot, lighted rooms into the pure fragrant summer air. I confess I do love the dawn, even in London. I like to see the gates of morning open with that clear light-green tinge that art has never yet been able to imitate: and if I could do as I liked, which none of us can, I should always be up and dressed by sunrise.

As we drove down Grosvenor Place, I saw Captain Lovell walking home, smoking a cigar. I think he caught a glimpse of my face at the carriage window, for I am almost sure he bowed, but I shrank back into the corner, and pretended to go to sleep; and when we arrived in Lowndes Street, I was not at all sorry to wish aunt Deborah good-night, and go upstairs to bed.

CHAPTER IV

RICHMOND PARK

"NOW then, Kate, late as usual; my phaeton's at the door, and we've only an hour and five minutes to do the twelve miles," said cousin John's cheery voice, as he accosted me on the following morning, running upstairs to change my dress, after my early ride.

Yes, notwithstanding the ball the night before, I was not going to disappoint Brilliant of his gallop; besides, these things are all habit; if you once get accustomed to early hours, nothing is so easy as to keep to them. Why, even Captain Lovell was in the Park as usual with his cigar—he seems regular enough about *that*, at all events—and he took his hat off so gracefully when he spied me cantering up the Ride, that I hadn't the heart to pass without stopping just to say, "How d'ye do?" but of course I didn't shake hands with him.

"Come, Kate, bustle, bustle," exclaimed that fidget, John; and in less time than my lady-readers

would believe, I had put on my pink bonnet and my white dress, and was bowling down to Richmond by the side of my cousin, behind a roan and a chestnut that stepped away in a style that it did one good to see.

"What a clipper that off-horse is, John," said I, as we cleared London, and got to the level road by Kew Gardens; "let me take the reins for five minutes, they're going so pleasantly;" but John don't like me to drive anything more sporting than a pony-carriage, and he refused point-blank, which, to say the least of it, was brutal on his part. If I hadn't thought it would make me sick, I should have liked to smoke, on purpose to provoke him. We did the distance with three minutes to spare, and as we pulled up in front of the Castle Hotel, I was proud to hear the admiration our *tout ensemble* elicited from a knot of idlers lounging round the door. "'Ere's a spicy set-out, Bill," said one. "Crikey! vot a pretty gal!" said another. "Vouldn't I like to be Vilikins with she for a Dinah!" exclaimed the dirtiest of the conclave; and although I appreciated the compliment, I was forced to turn my back on my unwashed admirer, and reply to the greetings of the picnic party we had come down to join.

There were Mrs. Molasses and her two daughters, to begin with, people of unheard-of wealth, of which they seemed to carry a large portion on their persons. The mamma, ample, black-eyed, fresh-coloured, and brocaded, with an extremely

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natural wig. The eldest daughter, Mary, with whom I had afterwards reason to be better acquainted, pale, languid, very quiet, and low-toned, with fine eyes, and soft dark hair, and what people call an *interesting* look. She took the sentimental line—was all feeling and poetry, and milk and water, and as easily frightened as she was reassured again. The younger girl, Jane, was the very reverse of her sister, short and dark and energetic —rather blue, and I thought a little impudent— however, I liked her the best of the two. Then came Sir Guy and Lady Scapegrace. The baronet, a stout, square, elderly man, with enormous dyed whiskers and hair to match, combining as much as possible the manners of the coachman with the morals of the *roué*; a tremendous dandy of the Four-in-hand Club school, high neckcloth, huge pins, gorgeous patterns, enormous buttons, and a flower in his mouth. His lady as handsome as a star, though a little hollow-eyed and *passée*. She looked like a tragedy queen, with her magnificent figure, and long black hair, and fierce flashing eyes, and woebegone expression, and the black velvet ribbon, with its diamond cross, which she always wore round her neck. Ah me! what stories that diamond cross could tell, if all be true that we hear of Lady Scapegrace! A girl sold for money, to become a rebellious wife to an unfeeling husband. A handsome young cousin, who cut his own throat in despair—they brought it in temporary insanity, of course; an elopement with a gallant major to

the south of France, and a duel there, in which the major was shot, but not by Sir Guy; an English lady of rank travelling on the Continent, independent and alone, breaking banks in all directions with her luck, and hearts with her beauty; a reconciliation, entirely for money considerations, which drove another far less erring woman into a mad-house (but that was Sir Guy's fault); and a darker tale still of a certain potion prepared by her hand, which the baronet was prevented from swallowing only by his invariable habit of contradicting his wife on all points, and which the lady herself had the effrontery to boast "would have settled all accounts." Not a word of truth in any of these stories, probably, but still, such is the character the world's good-nature affixes to that dark handsome woman at whom cousin John seems so very much alarmed.

Then there was an elderly Miss Minnows, who was horribly afraid of catching cold, but in whose character I could perceive no other very salient point; and a fair-haired young gentleman, whose name I did not distinctly catch, and who looked as if he ought to have been at school, where, indeed, I think he would have been much happier; and sundry regular stereotyped London men and women, well-bred and well-dressed, and cool and composed, and altogether thoroughly respectable and stupid; and a famous author, who drank a great deal of wine, and never opened his lips to speak; and I think that was all—no, by the bye, there was Captain

Lovell, who came very late—and we went soberly into Richmond Park, and dined under a tree.

I do not think I quite like a picnic. It is all very well, like most other arrangements, if everything goes right; but I sat between Sir Guy Scapegrace and the light-haired young gentleman; and although I could hear lots of fun going on at the other end of the table-cloth, where cousin John and Mary Molasses and Captain Lovell had got together, I was too far off to partake of it, and my *vis-à-vis*, Lady Scapegrace, scowled at me so from under her black eyebrows, though I believe utterly unconsciously, that she made me feel quite nervous. Then it was not reassuring to have that odious Sir Guy pressing me to eat everything, and looking right under my bonnet, and asking me to drink champagne at least four times; and if I turned to my other neighbour, and ventured to address him on the most commonplace subject, he blushed so painfully that I began to think he was quite as much afraid of me as I was of Sir Guy. Altogether, I was rather glad when the things were cleared away and put back into the hampers, and the gentlemen asked leave to light their cigars, and we broke up our circle, and lounged about and enjoyed ourselves in the shade of those fine trees on that dry velvet sward. We were rather put to it, though, for amusement, and had to propose games of forfeits and other pastimes; and cousin John, quite unwittingly, got me into a sad scrape by boasting about his horses.

"Not such another pair out of London to-day," expatiated John to the company in general. "We came down in seven minutes under the hour from my aunt's door in Lowndes Street; didn't we, Kate? and never turned a hair; did we, Kate? Why, they went so smooth, Kate couldn't keep her hands off the reins; could you, Kate? And there are few better judges, let me tell you, than Miss Coventry." I saw the ladies look at me, and then at each other; and I knew by that indescribable glance, which none but a woman can thoroughly appreciate, how from that moment they had vowed, one and all, to hate me eternally in their hearts. The offence had been committed; the sentence had gone forth. I had been tried for being fast, and found guilty *nem. con.*; from sneering Lady Scapegrace to unmeaning Miss Minnows, each stared at me for about two seconds, and so made up her mind. I cannot think why it is that this should be so great a crime in the eyes of my own sex. Next to being attractive to the other half of creation—and that I can easily understand is totally unpardonable—there is nothing makes a woman so angry with her sister as high spirits, natural courage, and above all, a love for a horse. It is very hard upon us that we should be debarred from all out-of-door exercises and amusements, by the prejudices of those very individuals who ought to back us up in our efforts to enlarge the circle of our amusements. I cannot see why it follows, that because I do not mind weather, I must, therefore,

be utterly regardless of morality, nor how my knack of breaking-in a horse should imply an infraction of all the commandments. Are men the only bipeds that can be at the same time brave and virtuous? Must pluck and piety be for ever divorced in the female character? Shall I never be able to keep the straight path in life, because I can turn an awkward corner with four horses at a trot? Female voices answer volubly in the negative; and I give in.

But odious Sir Guy thinks none the worse of me for my coaching predilections.

"Fond of driving, Miss Coventry?" says he, leering at me from over his great choking neck-cloth. "Seen my team? three greys and a piebald. If you like going fast, I can accommodate you. Proud to take you back on my drag. What? go on the box. Drive, if you like. Hey!"

I confess for one instant, much as I hated the old reprobate, I should have liked to go, if it was only to make all the women so angry; but just then I caught Captain Lovell's eye fixed upon me with a strange, earnest expression, and all at once I felt that nothing should induce me to trust myself with Sir Guy. I couldn't help blushing though as I declined; more particularly when my would-be charioteer swore he considered it "an engagement, hey?—only put off to another time—get the coach new painted—begad, Miss Coventry's favourite colour!" and the old monster grinned in my face till I could have boxed his ears.

The author by this time was fast asleep, with a handkerchief over his face—Miss Minnows searching in vain for a fabulous pair of clogs, as she imagined the dew must be falling—it was about six p.m., and hot June weather. Sir Guy was off to the hampers in search of brandy and soda, and the rest of the party lounging about in twos and threes, when Captain Lovell proposed we should stroll down to the river, and have a row in the cool of the evening. Mary Molasses voted it charming; Lady Scapegrace was willing to go anywhere away from Sir Guy; John, of course, all alive for a lark; and though Mrs. Molasses preferred remaining on dry land, she had no objection to trusting her girls with us. So we mustered a strong party for embarkation on Father Thames. Our two cavaliers ran forward to get the boat ready, Captain Lovell bounding over the fences and stiles almost as actively as Brilliant could have done; and John, who is no mean proficient at such exercises, following him; whilst we ladies paced along soberly in the rear.

"Can you row, Miss Coventry?" asked Lady Scapegrace, who seemed to have taken rather a fancy to me, probably out of contradiction to the other women; "I can—I rowed four miles once on the Lake of Geneva," she added in her deep, melancholy voice, "and we were caught in one of those squalls, and nearly lost. If it hadn't been for poor Alphonse, not one of us could have escaped. I wonder if drowning's a painful death,

Miss Coventry—the water always looks so inviting."

"Goodness, Lady Scapegrace!" exclaimed I; "don't take this opportunity of finding out: none of us can swim but John; and if he saves anybody, he's solemnly engaged to save *me*."

"I quite think with you, Lady Scapegrace," said the romantic Miss Molasses; "it looks so peaceful, and gives one such an idea of repose; I for one have not the slightest fear of death, or indeed of any mere bodily changes— Gracious goodness! the bull! the bull!!"

What a rout it was! The courageous young lady who thus gave us the first intimation of danger, leading the flight with a speed and activity of which I should have thought her languid frame totally incapable; Lady Scapegrace making use of her long legs with an utter forgetfulness of her usually grave and tragic demeanour; and the rest of the party seeking safety helter-skelter.

It was, indeed, a situation of some peril. Our course to the riverside had led us through a long narrow strip of meadow-land, bounded by high impervious thorn fences, such as I knew would be "bullfinches" in the winter, and which now, in all the luxuriance of summer foliage, presented a mass of thorns and fragrance that no mortal could expect to get through. At either end of the field was a high hog-backed stile, such as ladies usually make considerable difficulties about surmounting, but which are by no means so impossible of transit

when an infuriated bull is bringing up the rear. We are already a quarter of the way across the field, when Miss Mary's exclamation made us aware of our enemy, who had been quietly cropping the grass in a corner behind us, but who now, roused by our gaudy dresses and the piercing screams of some of our party, was lashing himself into a rage, and looking sufficiently mischievous to be a very unpleasant acquaintance. It was impossible to turn round and make for the stile we had just left, as the bull now occupied a position exactly between us and that place of safety: it was hopeless, particularly in our light muslin gowns, to attempt the hedge on either side; there was nothing for it but a fair run to the other end of the meadow, about a quarter of a mile—and *sauve qui peut* was now the order of the day.

I will not allow that I am deficient in courage; on the contrary, as cousin John says, I am rather proud of my pluck; but there is nothing so contagious as a panic, and I too ran for my very life. The bull came galloping after us, tossing his head and rolling his great body about as if he quite enjoyed the fun; nor do I know how the adventure would have ended, for he must have overtaken some of us before we could reach our haven, had not Lady Scapegrace caught her foot in the long grass, and, falling prostrate, buried her face in her hands, and given herself up, as she afterwards assured me, to the prospect of a horrible and violent death. I could not leave her in such a situation.

By an impulse for which I cannot account, I stopped short, turned round, got between the pursuer and his fallen foe, and with a beating heart and my knees knocking together, faced the great mischievous brute, with no other weapon, offensive or defensive, than a laced pocket-handkerchief. I believe he was a well-meaning bull after all; for instead of crashing in upon me, as I half expected he would, and immolating me on the spot, he too stopped short, stared, bellowed, and began sniffing the grass, and pawing up the turf, and whisking his tail about, just as Brilliant does when he is going to lie down. I don't think he had ever seen a young lady, certainly not a French bonnet, before, and he didn't seem to know what to make of the combination; so there we stood, he and I staring each other out of countenance, but without proceeding to any further extremities. I know I have plenty of courage, for after the first minute I wasn't the least bit afraid; I felt just as I do when I ride at a large fence—as I get nearer and nearer, I feel something rising and rising within me that enables me to face anything; and so when I had confronted the bull for a little time, I felt inclined to carry the war into the enemy's country, and advance upon him. But of course all this is very indelicate and unfeminine; and it would have been far more virtuous and ladylike to have run shrieking away like Miss Molasses, or laid down and given in at once like poor Lady Scapegrace, who was quite resigned to being tossed and

"Between the pursuer & his fallen foe"

trampled upon, and only gave vent every now and then to a stifled moan.

Well, at last I did advance a few steps, and the bull gave ground in the same proportion. I began to think I should beat him after all; when, to my great relief, I must allow, I heard a voice behind me exclaim, "By Jove, what a plucky girl!" and I thought I heard something muttered that sounded very like "darling," but of course that couldn't be meant for me; and Captain Lovell, hot, handsome, and breathless, made his appearance, and soon drove our enemy into the farthest corner of the field. As soon as the coast was clear, we raised poor Lady Scapegrace, who kissed me with tears in her eyes as she thanked me for what she called saving her life. I had no idea the woman had so much feeling. Captain Lovell gave each of us an arm as we walked on to join our party, and he explained how the screams of Miss Molasses had reached him even at the riverside, and how he had turned and hastened back immediately.

"Fortunately in time to be of some use. But I never saw a finer thing done, Miss Coventry: if I live to a hundred, I shall never forget it"—and he looked as if he would have added, "or you either."

Many were the exclamations, and much the conversation created by our adventure. The ladies who had run away so gallantly were of course too much agitated for the proposed boating excursion; so, after sundry restoratives at the hotel, we ordered

the carriages to return to town. Cousin John gave Frank (as he calls him) a place in the back seat of his phaeton ; and he leaned over and talked to me the whole way home. What a pleasant drive it was in the moonlight, and how happy I felt! I was really sorry when we got back to London. Frank seemed quite anxious to make aunt Deborah's acquaintance ; and I thought I shouldn't wonder if he was to call in Lowndes Street very soon.

CHAPTER V

'APPY 'AMPTON

WHEN aunt Deborah is laid up with one of *her* colds, she always has a wonderful accession of "propriety" accompanying the disorder; and that which would appear to her at the worst a harmless *escapade* when in her usual health and spirits, becomes a crime of the blackest dye when seen through the medium of barley-broth and wate·-gruel, these being aunt Deborah's infallible emedies for a catarrh. Now the cold in question had lasted its victim over the Ascot meeting, over our picnic to Richmond, and bade fair to give her employment during the greater part of the summer, so obstinate was the enemy when he had once possessed himself of the citadel; and, under these circumstances, I confess it appeared to me quite hopeless to ask her permission to accompany cousin John on a long-promised expedition to Hampton Races. I did not dare make the request myself; and I own I had great misgivings, even when I overheard from my boudoir the all-powerful John preferring his petition, which he did with a sort of abrupt good-humour peculiarly his own.

"Going to take Kate out for another lark, aunt, if you have no objection," says John, plumping down into an arm-chair, and forthwith proceeding to entangle aunt Deborah's knitting into the most hopeless confusion. "Only some quiet races near town; all amongst ourselves, you know — gentlemen riders, and that sort of thing."

Aunt Deborah, who is a good deal behindhand in all matters connected with the turf, and who has set her face into a determined refusal when she hears the word "racing," rather relaxes at the mention of gentlemen-riders, and replies gravely, "John, I want to talk to you about Kate. The girl's wild after horses and hounds, and all such unfeminine pursuits. I wonder you like to see it yourself, my dear. Now don't you think it would be far better to encourage her in domestic tastes and amusements? I give you my word, she hasn't done a bit of worsted-work for a fortnight."

John's face must have been good at this piece of intelligence; if there is one thing he hates more than another, it is cross-stitch. But he replied with exemplary gravity, that "cousin Kate never was strong, you know, aunt, and she is ordered to be a good deal in the open air, with plenty of horse-exercise; and this is delightful weather for riding."

"Well, John," says aunt Deborah, "of course, if you don't mind it, I needn't; you'll be the sufferer, my dear, not I" (I wonder what she meant by that?); "and I must let her go, if you

choose to take her, John. How like your father you're growing, my handsome boy!" and aunt Deborah kissed cousin John on the forehead, with tears in her eyes; and they called to me to get ready, and the horses came round, and in less than ten minutes we were up and away.

It was very gratifying to overhear the complimentary remarks made upon the general appearance of White Stockings, whom I had ridden down, to save Brilliant, and who, despite his ugliness, is a very hunting-looking horse.

"Looks a game 'un, don't he, squire?" remarked a jolly-looking Surrey farmer, in top-boots, to a dilapidated friend in a white neckcloth. "Shouldn't wonder if he couldn't kick the dirt in some of their faces, with that tight lass to keep his head straight."

The friend was a melancholy man, and nodded his silent affirmative with a sigh. I think, early as it was, they had both been drinking.

"Look at that chestnut horse!" exclaimed a good-looking boy of some twenty summers, who had coached his own drag down, like a second Phaeton, only as yet with better luck, and was now smoking a huge cigar on its roof. "Isn't he the image of old Paleface? Who's the woman, eh? Does nobody know her? I'll ask her to come and sit up here. She looks like a lady, too," he added, checking himself; "never mind, here goes!" and he was jumping off the coach, to tender me, I presume, his polite invitation in

person, when his arm was caught by the man next him, who was no other than John's friend, Captain Lovell.

"Charley, stop!" exclaimed Frank, flushing all over his handsome face and temples; "I know her, I tell you; have a care, it's Miss Coventry;" and in another instant he had bounded to the earth, accosted my chaperon with a hearty "Jack, how goes it?" and was deep in conversation with my humble self, with his hand on my horse's neck—(Frank always wears such good gloves)—and his pleasant countenance beaming with delight at our chance interview. I liked the races better after this, and should have spent a happier day, perhaps, without the society of Mrs. Lumley, who appeared likewise on horseback, quite unexpectedly, and was riding the most beautiful brown mare I ever saw in my life. I quite wished I had brought down Brilliant, if only to have met her on more equal terms. As we were the only two ladies on horseback, of course we were obliged to fraternise (if the weaker sex may use such an expression), as, indeed, we must have done had we been the bitterest foes on earth, instead of merely hating each other with common civility. Mrs. Lumley seemed on particularly good terms with Frank Lovell—I do not know that I liked her any the better for that — and expressed her sentiments and opinions to the world in general with a vivacity and freedom peculiarly her own.

"I am out on the sly, you know," she observed, with an arch smile. "I have a good quiet aunt who lives down at Richmond, and I do penance there for a time, whenever I have been more than usually wicked; but to-day I could not resist the fine weather, and the crowd, and the fun, and, above all, the bad company, which amuses me more than all the rest put together, though I do not include you, Miss Coventry, nor yet Mr. Jones, but I am afraid I must Captain Lovell. Come, let's ride amongst the carriages, and see the ninnies."

So Mrs. Lumley and I plunged into the crowd, leaving Frank to return to his drag and his betting-book, and cousin John somewhat discontentedly to bring up the rear.

"After all, I don't see much harm in Hampton," said my lively guide, as we threaded our way between the carriages; "though, to be sure, there are some very queer-looking people on the course. I could tell you strange stories of most of them, Miss Coventry, only you wouldn't believe me. Do you see that old, plainish woman, with such black hair and eyebrows—something like Lady Scapegrace, only not so handsome as my favourite enemy?—Would you believe it, she might marry three coronets at this moment if she chose, and she won't have any one of them! She is not good-looking, you can see; she can scarcely write her own name. She has no conversation, I happen to know; for I met her once at dinner, and she

cannot by any chance put an 'H' into its right place. Yet men see something in her that is totally inexplicable to us, and she seems to have a mysterious influence over all ages and all sorts. One of these infatuated noblemen is decrepit and twaddling; the other a stern reserved man, that up to forty years of age was supposed to be the very impersonation of common-sense; and the third, young, clever, and handsome, a man that might marry half the nicest women in England, if he liked. And why, do you think, she won't pick and choose from such a trio? Why, forsooth, because she has set her stupid heart on a drunken stockbroker, who won't have a word to say to her, and would have been here to-day, I have no doubt, if he hadn't been afraid of meeting her. Well, there's a stranger story than that about the girl with long fair hair in the next carriage. You can see her now, in a pink bonnet, drinking sherry and soda-water—it is supposed that she is old Goldfinch's daughter, and that he won't give her a farthing; but *I* know somebody who knows his lawyer, and that girl will have half a million, if she don't drink herself to death before old Goldfinch takes his departure from this wicked world. She is beautiful, and clever, and accomplished, and all the young men are in love with her; but she cannot keep sober, and in three years' time she will have lost her youth, and her health, and her faculties, and, in all probability, will finish in a mad-house.

There's Frank Lovell making fierce love to her now."

And as Mrs. Lumley concluded with this amiable remark, I looked round for cousin John, and rode away from her in disgust at her flippancy, and sick at heart to think of such a man as Captain Lovell wasting his smiles on such a creature. To be sure, he only said three words to her, for when I looked round again at the carriage he was gone. There is something very amusing to me in the bustle of a race-course; and yet, after talking to Mrs. Lumley, the gloss seemed to be only on the surface. She had told me enough of the company to make me fancy there must be some strange history belonging to each. Like the man that saw through the roofs of the houses in Madrid, thanks to the agency of his familiar, I thought that my demon on a side-saddle had taught me to see into the very hearts and secrets of the motley assemblage.

There was a handsome girl, with beautiful teeth, and neatly braided hair, and such a brilliant smile, attracting a crowd round her, as she sang piquant songs in a sweet, deep-toned voice, that ought to have made her fortune on the stage, if it had been properly cultivated—sang them, too, with a look and manner that I have seen seldom rivalled by the cleverest actresses; and I thought what a face and form were wasted here to make profit for one knave, and sport for some fifty fools. As she accompanied herself

on the harp, and touched its strings with a grace and expression which made amends for a certain want of tuition, I could not help fancying her in a drawing-room, surrounded by admirers, making many a heart ache with her arch smile and winning ways. Without being positively beautiful, she had the knack, so few women possess, of looking charming in every attitude, and with every expression of countenance; and although her songs were of a somewhat florid school, yet I could not help thinking that, with those natural gifts, and a plaintive old ballad, English or Scotch, such as "Annie Laurie," or "The Nut-brown Maid," to bring them out, in a pretty drawing-room, with the assistance of a good dressmaker—dear! she might marry a duke, if she liked.

And yet all this belonged to a dark, close-shaved ruffian, with silver rings and a yellow handkerchief, who scowled and prowled about her, and looked as if he was likely enough to beat her when they got home. But she hands up an ivory bowl for contributions amongst the young dandies on the roof of a neighbouring coach, who have been listening open-mouthed to the Siren, and shillings and half-crowns, and a bit of gold from the one last out of the Bench, pour into it; and she moves off, to make way for three French glee-maidens, with a monkey and a tambourine, and the swells return to their cigars and their betting, and we are all attention for the next event on the card, because it is a gentlemen-riders' race; and the performances

will consequently be as different as possible from what we have just seen.

"We'll secure a good place for this, Kate," says cousin John, edging his horse in as near the judges' stand as he can get; "Frank Lovell has a mare to run, and I have backed her for a sovereign."

"Dear, I hope she'll win!" is my ardent rejoinder.

"Thank you, Kate," says kind cousin John, who concludes I take an unusual interest in his speculations; and forthwith we proceed to criticise the three animals brought to the post, and to agree that Captain Lovell's Parachute is far the best-looking of the lot; or, as Sir Guy Scapegrace says to the well-pleased owner, "If make and shape go for anything, Frank, she ought to beat them, as far as they can see."

Sir Guy is chaperoning a strange-looking party of men and women, who have been very noisy since luncheon-time. He is attired in a close-shaved hat (which he had the effrontery to take off to me, but I looked the other way), a white coat, and a red neckcloth, the usual flower in his mouth being replaced for the occasion by a large cigar. Captain Lovell hopes "I admire his mare—she has a look of Brilliant from here, Miss Coventry. Baby Larkins, of the Lancers, is to ride; and the Baby will do her justice, if anyone can—he's far the best of the young ones, now."

"Do you mean his name is Baby?" said I, much amused; "or that you call him so because

he is such a child? He looks as if he ought to be with mamma still."

"We always call him Baby in the Lancers," explained Frank, "because he joined us so very young. He is nineteen, though you would guess him about twelve, but he's got the brains of a man of sixty and the nerves of a giant. Ah! Parachute, you may kick, old girl, but you won't get rid of *that* child!"

And sure enough the Baby sat like a rock, with a grim smile, and preserving throughout a silence and *sang froid* which nothing seemed able to overcome. Two more seedy-looking animals made up the entry. The lamer one of the two was ridden by a stout major, with a redundancy of moustaches—the other by a lanky cornet of Heavy Dragoons, who seemed not to know where on earth to dispose of his arms and legs, besides finding his cap somewhat in his way, and being much embarrassed with his whip. They gallop up and down before starting, till I wonder how any galloping can be left for the race; and after a futile attempt or two they get away, the Baby making strong running, the stout major waiting closely upon his infantine antagonist, while the long cornet, looming like a windmill in the distance, brings up the rear.

"Parachute still making running," says John, standing erect in his stirrups, his honest face beaming with excitement—"Woa, horse!—stand still, White Stockings—now they reach the turn, and the Baby takes a pull—Gad, old Ganymede's

coming up. Well done, major—no, the old one's flogging. Parachute wins. Now, Baby!—now, major—the horse!—the mare!—Best race I ever saw in my life—a dead heat—Ha! ha! ha!" The latter explosion of mirth is due to the procrastinated arrival of the long cornet, who flogs and works as religiously home as if he had a hundred more behind him, and who reaches the weighing enclosure in time to ascertain with his own eyes that Ganymede has won, the lame plater who rejoices in that classical appellation having struggled home first by a head, "notwithstanding," as the sporting papers afterwards expressed themselves, "the judicious riding and beautiful finish of that promising young jockey, Mr. B. Larkins." The Baby himself, however, is unmoved as usual, nodding to Parachute's disappointed owner without moving a muscle of his countenance. He merely remarks, "Short of work, Frank—told you so afore I got up;" and putting on a tiny white overcoat like a plaything, disappears, and is seen no more.

What a confusion there is in getting away. Sir Guy Scapegrace has a yearly bet with the young Phaeton, who wanted to invite me on his box, as to which shall get first to Kensington on their way back to town. You would suppose Sir Guy was very happy at home, by his anxiety to be off; the two drags are soon bumping and rolling and rattling along the sward. The narrow lane through which they must make their way is completely blocked up with spring vans, and tax-carts, and open carriages

and shut carriages, and broughams and landaus, and every description of vehicle that ever came out of Long Acre, whilst more four-horsed coaches, with fast teams, and still faster loads, are thundering in the rear. Slang reigns supreme; and John Gilpin's friend, who had a "ready wit," would here meet with his match. Nor are jest and repartee (what John calls chaff) the only missiles bandied about; toys, knocked off the sticks for the purpose, darken the air as they fly from one vehicle to another—and the broadside from a well-supplied coach is like that of a seventy-four. Fun and good-humour abound, but confusion gets worse confounded. Young Phaeton's wheel is locked with a market-gardener's, who is accompanied by two sisters-in-law, and the suitors of those nowise disconcerted damsels, all more or less intoxicated. Thriftless has his near leader in the back seat of a pony-carriage, and Sir Guy's off-wheeler is over the pole. John and I agree to make a détour, have a pleasant ride in the country, never mind about dinner, and so get back to London by moonlight. As we reach a quiet sequestered lane, and inhale the pleasant fragrance of the hawthorn—always sweetest towards nightfall—we hear a horse's tramp behind us, and are joined by Frank Lovell, who explains with unnecessary distinctness that "he always makes a practice of riding back from Hampton to avoid the crowd, and always comes that way"; if so, he must be in the habit of taking a considerable détour, but he joins our party, and we ride home together.

How beautifully the moon shone upon the river as we crossed Kew Bridge that calm, silent, summer night — how it flickered through their branches, and silvered over the old trees; and what a peaceful, lovely landscape it was! I thought Frank's low sweet voice quite in keeping with the time and the scene. As we rode together, John lagging a good deal behind (that bay horse of John's never *could* walk with White Stockings), I could not help thinking how much I had misunderstood Captain Lovell's character: what a deal of feeling—almost of romance—there was under that conventional exterior which he wore before the world! I liked him so much more now I came to know him better. I was quite sorry when we had to wish him good-night, and John and I rode thoughtfully home through the quiet streets. I thought my cousin's manner was altered, too, though I scarce knew how. His farewell sounded more constrained, more *polite* than usual, when he left me at aunt Deborah's door; and whilst I was undressing, I reflected on all the proceedings of the day, and tried to remember what I had done that could possibly have displeased good-natured John. The more I went over it backwards and forwards, the less could I make of it.

"Can it be possible," I thought at last—"can it be possible that cousin John"—and here I popped out my candle and jumped into bed.

CHAPTER VI

FRANK LOVELL

I REALLY had not courage to take my usual canter the morning after Hampton Races. I did not feel as if I could face the umbrella and the cigar at the rails in the Ride, and yet I rang the bell once for my maid to help me on with my habit, and had my hand on it more than once to order my horse; but I thought better of it. Poor aunt Deborah's cold was still bad, though she was downstairs; so I determined to take care of her, in common gratitude, and give her the advantage of my agreeable society. I am very fond of aunt Deborah, in my own way; and I know there is nothing she likes so much as a "quiet morning with Kate."

The hours passed off rather slowly till luncheon-time. I did forty-two stitches of worsted-work—I never do more than fifty at a time, unless it's "grounding"—and I got off Hannah More because aunt Deborah was too hoarse to read to me, and I really cannot read that excellent work to her without laughing; but I thought luncheon never would be ready, and when it did come I couldn't eat any.

"Smoothed his hat & talked about the weather"

However, I went upstairs afterwards, and smoothed my hair, and set my collar straight, and was glad to hear aunt Deborah give her usual order that she was "at home," with her usual solemnity. I had not been ten minutes in the drawing-room, before a knock at the door brought my heart into my mouth, and our tragic footman announced "Captain Lovell," in his most tragic voice. In marched Frank, who had never set eyes on my aunt in his life, and shook hands with me, and made her a very low bow, with a degree of effrontery that nothing but a man could ever have been capable of assuming. Aunt Deborah drew herself up—and she really *is* very formidable when she gets on her high horse—and looked first at me, and then at Frank, and then at me again, and I blushed like a fool, and hesitated, and introduced "Captain Lovell" to "My aunt, Miss Horsingham!" and I didn't the least know what to do next, and had a great mind to make a bolt of it and run upstairs. But our visitor seemed to have no misgivings whatever, and smoothed his hat, and talked about the weather, as if he had known us all from childhood. I have often remarked, that if you only deprive a man of the free use of his hands, there is no difficulty which he is unable to face. Give him something to handle and keep fidgeting at, and he seems immediately to be in his element; never mind what it is, a paper-knife and a book to open, or a flower to pull in pieces, or a pair of scissors and a bit of thread to snip, or even the end of a stick to suck,

and he draws inspiration, and what is more to the purpose, conversation, from any and all of these sources. But let him have his hands entirely to himself, give him nothing to lay hold of, and he is completely dumfoundered on the spot. Here was Frank brushing and smoothing away at his hat till it shone like black satin, and facing my aunt with a gallantry and steadiness beyond all praise; but I believe if I could have snatched it away from him and hid it under the sofa, he would have been routed at once, and must have fled in utter bewilderment and dismay. After my aunt had replied courteously enough to a few commonplace observations, she gave one of her ominous coughs, and I trembled for the result.

"Captain Beville," said my aunt; "I think I once knew a family of your name in Hampshire; the New Forest, if I remember rightly."

"Excuse me," said Frank, nowise disconcerted, and with a sly glance at me, "my name is Lovell."

"Oh," replied my aunt, with a considerable assumption of stateliness, "then, a-hem, Captain Greville, I don't think I have ever had the pleasure of meeting you before."

And my aunt looked as if she didn't care whether she ever met him again. This would have been a poser to most people, but Frank applied himself diligently to his hat, and opened the trenches in his own way.

"The fact is, Miss Horsingham," said he,

"that I have taken advantage of my intimacy with your nephew to call upon you without a previous introduction, in hopes of ascertaining what has become of an old brother-officer of mine, a namesake of yours, and consequently, I should conclude, a relative. There is, I believe, only one family in England of your name. Excuse me, Miss Horsingham, for so personal a remark, but I am convinced he must have been a near connection from a peculiarity which everyone, who knows anything about our old English families, is aware belongs to yours—my poor friend Charlie had a beautiful hand; you, madam, I perceive, own the same advantage, therefore I am convinced you must be a near connection of my old comrade. You may think me impertinent, but there is no mistaking the Horsingham hand."

Aunt Deborah gave in at once.

"I cannot call to mind at this moment any relative of mine who is likely to have served with you" (nor was this to be wondered at, the warrior *aux blanches mains* being a fabulous creation of wicked Frank); "but I have no doubt, Captain Lovell, that you are correct. I have great pleasure in making your acquaintance, particularly as you seem well acquainted with our belongings. Do you stay any length of time in town?"

"I seldom remain to the end of the season; but this year I think I shall. By the way, Miss Horsingham, I saw a curious old picture the other day in the west of England, purporting to be a

portrait of the celebrated Ysonde of Brittany with the white hand — in which I traced a strong resemblance to some of the Horsinghams, with whom I am acquainted. Yours is, I believe, an old Norman family, and as I am a bit of an antiquary" (Oh, Frank! Frank!) "I consulted my friend, Sir. J. Burke, on the subject, who assures me that the Le Montants—Godfrey le Montant, if you remember, distinguished himself highly in the second crusade — that the Le Montants claimed direct descent from the old Dukes of Brittany, and consequently from the very lady of whom we are speaking. Roger le Montant came over with the Conqueror, and although strangely omitted from the Roll of Battle Abbey, doubtless received large grants of land in Hampshire from William; and two generations later, we can trace his descendant, Hugo, in the same locality, under the Anglicised name of Horsengem, now corrupted to Horsingham; of which illustrious family you are of course aware yours is a younger branch. It is curious that the distinguishing mark of the race should have been preserved in all its shapely beauty" (added Frank, with the gravest face possible, and glancing at the lavender kids) "through so many changes and so many successive generations."

Aunt Deborah was delighted.

"Such a clever young man, my dear," she said to me, afterwards; "such manners! such a voice! *quite* one of the old school—evidently well-bred, and with that respect for good blood which, in

these days, I regret to say, is fast becoming obsolete. Kate, I like him vastly!"

In the meantime, she entered freely into conversation with our visitor; and before he went away, by which time his hat looked as if it had been ironed, "She hoped he would call again; she was always at home till two o'clock, and trusted to have the pleasure of his company at dinner, as soon as she was well enough to get anybody to meet him."

So Frank went off to ride in the Park, on the neatest possible brown hack; for I saw him quite plainly trot round the corner, as I went into the balcony to water my poor geraniums.

Well, I waited and waited, and John never came for me, as was his usual habit; and I began to think I must lose my ride, for I am not allowed to go by myself in the afternoons; and at last I was obliged to coax aunt Deborah to take me out in the open carriage, for it was a beautiful day, and it would be just the thing for her cold: so we went dowagering about, and shopped in Bond Street, and looked at some lace in Regent Street, and left cards for Lady Horsingham, as in duty bound, after helping her to make a good ball; and then we went into the Ring, and I looked and looked everywhere, but I could not see anything like Frank or his brown hack. To be sure the Ride was as crowded as a fair. But I did see cousin John, and I must say it was too bad of him to keep me waiting and watching all the afternoon, and

then never to take the trouble of sending a note or a message, but to start off by himself, and escort Miss Molasses, as if he was her brother *at least*, if not a nearer relation. Miss Molasses, forsooth! with her lackadaisical ways, and her sentimental nonsense; and that goose John taking it all in open-mouthed, as if she was an angel upon earth. Well, at all events, she don't ride like me. Such a figure I never saw on a horse! all on one side, like the handle of a teapot, bumping when she trots, and wobbling when she canters, with braiding all over her habit, and a *white* feather in her hat, and gauntlet gloves (of course one may wear gauntlet gloves for hunting, but that's not London)[1] and her sallow face. People call her interesting, but *I* call her *bilious*; and a wretched long-legged Rosinante, with *round* reins and tassels, and a netting over its ears, and a head like a fiddle-case, and no more action than a camp-stool. Such a couple I never beheld. I wonder John wasn't ashamed to be seen with her, instead of leaning his hand upon her horse's neck, and looking up in her face with his broad honest smile; and taking no more notice of her sister Jane, who is a clever girl, with something in her, than if she had been the groom. I was provoked with him beyond all patience. Had it been Mrs. Lumley, for instance, I could have understood it; for she certainly is a chatty, amusing

[1] Fashion is nothing if not fleeting. Miss Coventry, had she been speaking in this year of grace 1901, would assuredly have pronounced gauntlet gloves out hunting impossible.—Ed.

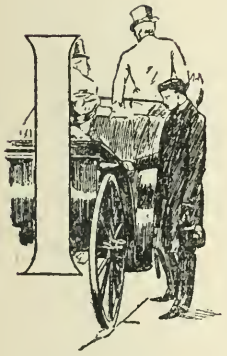
woman, though dreadfully bold ; and it is a pleasure to see her canter up the Park, in her close-fitting habit, and her neat hat, with her beautiful round figure swaying gracefully to every motion of her horse, yet so imperceptibly, that you could fancy she might balance a glassful of water on her head without spilling a drop. To say nothing of the brown mare, the only animal in London I covet, who is herself a picture ; such action! such a mouth! and such a shape! I coaxed aunt Deborah to wait near Apsley House, on purpose that we might see her before we left the Park ; and sure enough we did see her, as usual, surrounded by a swarm of admirers, and next to her—positively *next* to her—Frank Lovell, on the very brown hack that had been standing an hour at our door. He saw me, too, and took his hat off; and she said something to him, and they both laughed!

I asked aunt Deborah to go home, for it was getting late, and the evening air was not very good for her poor cold. I did not feel well myself, somehow ; and when dear aunty told me I looked pale, I was forced to confess to a slight headache. I am not subject to low spirits generally—I have no patience with a woman that is ; but, of course, one is sometimes a little out of sorts ; and I confess I did not feel quite up to the mark that evening—I cannot tell why. If John flatters himself, it was because he behaved so brutally in disappointing me, he is very much mistaken ; and as for Captain Lovell, I am sure he may ride with anybody he

likes, for what I care. I wonder, with all his cleverness, he can't see how that woman is only laughing at him. However, it's no business of mine. So I went into my boudoir, drank some tea, and then locked myself in, and had a good cry.

CHAPTER VII

THE END OF A SEASON



IT is wonderful how soon the London season comes to an end; and, in fact, it is difficult to say when its tide is really at the flood. Single men—and they are necessary ingredients for gaiety wherever there are young ladies—single men seldom go to town much before the Derby. Then comes Ascot, for which meeting they leave the metropolis, and enjoy some quiet retreat in the neighbourhood of Windsor, taking with them many potables, and what they call a "dog cook." After Ascot, people begin to think about going away; and before you know where you are, three more weeks have elapsed, and it is July. Dear, what a scatter there is then! Some off to Norway, some to Cowes, some to Caithness, and some to Galway. Those that remain for Goodwood are sure to go to Newmarket; and the man who sticks religiously to the pavement, and resists the allurements of all the

above-mentioned resorts, only does so because he is meditating a trip to California, Kamtschatka, or the Rocky Mountains, and is so preoccupied with portable soup, patent saddle-bags, bowie-knives, and revolvers, that he might just as well be at his ultimate destination in person, for all the benefit one gets from his society. I confess I don't like the end of the season. You keep on trying to be gay, whilst your friends are dropping off, and disappearing one by one. Like the survivor in some horrid pestilence, you know your time must come too; but you shut your eyes to the certainty, and greet every fresh departure with a gaiety more forced, and a smile more and more hopeless.

Well, my London season, too, was drawing to its close; and I confess I had enjoyed it very much. What with my morning gallops and afternoon saunters (for John had returned to his allegiance, and came to take me out regularly, although he always joined Miss Molasses' party when he got into the Park); what with aunt Deborah's tiresome cold, which obliged me to go about a good deal by myself, and the agreeable society of Frank Lovell, who never missed an opportunity of being with us, I had been very happy; and I was quite sorry to think it was all so soon to come to an end. John was already talking of a fishing excursion to Norway, and actually proposed that I should accompany him, an arrangement which aunt Deborah declared was totally impracticable; and which I confess I do not myself think would have been a very good plan. I

had made several pleasant acquaintances, amongst whom I may number Lady Scapegrace, that much-maligned dame having taken a great fancy to me ever after the affair of the bull; and proving, when I came to know her better, a very different person from what the world gave her credit for being. With all her faults—the chief of which were an uncontrollable temper, and much too strong feelings for the nineteenth century — she had a warm, affectionate heart, and was altogether an energetic, straight-forward woman, very much in earnest, whether for good or for evil. But there was one thing that vexed me considerably, amongst all my regrets for past pleasures and castles in the air for the future; and this was the conduct of Captain Lovell. What did he mean? I couldn't make him out at all. One day calling on my aunt at eleven in the morning, and staying to luncheon, and making himself so agreeable to her, and bringing bouquets of the loveliest flowers (which I know came from Harding's or else direct from Covent Garden) to me, and then going away as if he had fifty more things to say, and lingering over his farewell as if he was on the eve of departure for China instead of May Fair, and joining me again in the Park, and asking me if I was going to the opera, and finding out all my engagements and intentions, as if he couldn't possibly live five minutes out of my sight, and then, perhaps, never coming near us for days together, till even my aunt "wondered what had become of that pleasant Captain Lovell," and when

he met me in the Park taking off his hat with a civil bow, as if he had only been introduced the night before; all this I couldn't make out, and I didn't half like, as I told Lady Scapegrace one hot morning, sitting with her in her boudoir. I was a good deal at Lady Scapegrace's now; and the more so, because that was the place of all others at which I was least likely to meet Sir Guy.

"Men are so uncertain, my dear," said her ladyship, sitting in a morning *déshabillé*, with her long black hair combed straight out over her shoulders, and reaching nearly to her knees; "if you ask me candidly whether he means anything, I tell you I think Frank Lovell a shocking flirt."

"Flirt!" I replied, half crying with vexation, "it's time enough for him to flirt with me when I give him any encouragement; but I don't, Lady Scapegrace, and I never will. I hope I'm too proud for that. Only when a man is always in one's pocket wherever one goes, when he sends one bouquets, and rides out in the rain to get one's bracelet mended, and watches one from a corner of the room if one happens to be dancing with anybody else, and looks pleased when one is dull, and cross when one laughs; why, he either does prefer, or ought to prefer, one's society to that of Miss Molasses and Mrs. Lumley, and that is why I tell you I can't quite make out Captain Lovell."

"Don't talk of that odious woman," exclaimed Lady Scapegrace, between whom and Mrs. Lumley there was a polite feud of some years' standing:

"she is ready and willing to jump down Frank Lovell's throat, or anyone else's for the matter of that, so bold as she is, and so utterly regardless—such stories, my dear; but take my advice, Kate, play that cheerful cousin of yours against Master Frank. I never knew it fail yet, if you only go the right way to work. Men are not only very vain, but very jealous; don't let him think you are going to marry your cousin, or he may consider it a capital arrangement, and a sort of matter-of-course affair, which is all in his favour. Men like Frank always prefer other people's property; and, I have no doubt, he would be over head and ears in love with you if you were not single, so don't be going to marry Mr. Jones; but just appeal to him about every earthly thing you do or say; look after him when he leaves the room, as if you couldn't bear him out of your sight. Get Frank to abuse him if you can, and then fight his battles fiercely; and directly the latter thinks there is a rival in the field, he will be down on his knees—you mark my words—in two days' time at the furthest. I think I ought to know what men are, my dear" (and to do Lady Scapegrace justice, she had studied that variety of the creation to some purpose, or she was much maligned): "I know that they can't, any of them, see three yards before their noses, and that you can turn and twist them which way you will, if you only go upon this principle—that they are full of vanity and self-conceit, and totally deficient in brains."

"But I'm sure Captain Lovell's a clever man," said I, not disposed to come to quite such sweeping conclusions as those of my monitress; "and—and—I don't mean to say that I *care* about him, Lady Scapegrace; but still, it mightn't answer with him, and—and—I shouldn't like to lose him altogether."

"Pooh! lose him! fiddlestick!" rejoined her ladyship. "You'll see. He is to join our party at Greenwich this afternoon. By the way, when Sir Guy heard you were coming, he proposed to drive us all down on that horrid coach; but I told him we should be taken for the people that usually occupy it, and nothing should induce me to go, so that plan was given up. But you and I will go down in the barouche, and I'll call for you, and we'll take Mr. Jones with us; and mind you're very civil to him, and only notice the other in a quiet, good-humoured way, for he mustn't think you do it out of pique, and before the whitebait is on the table you'll see he'll be a different man. But now you must go—there's a dear. I'll call for you at five—it's too bad to turn you out, but I'm never at home to anyone between three and half-past four. Good-bye, dear—good-bye."

And Lady Scapegrace kissed me most affectionately, and promised to call for me punctually at five, till which hour I cannot make out why her time was always engaged.

As I tripped downstairs, hoping to make my escape without being attended by the whole establishment to open the house-door, whom should

I come across but odious Sir Guy, in a sort of scarlet fancy dress, which I concluded was his morning demi-toilette. He actually had the effrontery to propose that I should accompany him to the stable, and that he should then "show me his boudoir — hey? You look like a rose this morning, Miss Coventry, should like to transplant you — what?" and whilst he stood dodging and grinning on the stairs, I managed to slip by him, and get safe into the street. I wonder when men think they are beginning to grow old; I am sure Sir Guy fancies he is still in the flower of his youth, and so charming that nobody can resist him.

What a pleasant day we had! Only we four —Lady Scapegrace, cousin John, Captain Lovell, and I. We went down in Lady Scapegrace's barouche, and walked in Greenwich Park, and adjourned to a nice room with a bay window, and such a look-out over the river, blushing rose-colour in the evening sun. And the whitebait was so good, and the champagne-cup so nice; and we were all in such spirits, and Frank was so kind, and attentive, and agreeable, I couldn't find it in my heart to be cross to him; so it ended in our making up any little imaginary differences we may have had, and becoming better friends than ever. As we sat in the balcony over the river—the two gentlemen smoking their after-dinner cigars, and we ladies sipping our coffee — I thought I had never enjoyed an evening so much; and even John, who was generally dreadfully afraid of Lady

Scapegrace, became quite lively and gallant (for him), and they laughed, and talked, and joked about all sorts of things, while Frank leant over my shoulder, and conversed more gravely than was his habit; and I listened, and thought him pleasanter even than usual. By the way, that lilac bonnet never quite lost the odour of tobacco afterwards.

"How quick the time passes!" said Frank, with almost a sigh. "Can't we do anything to put off horrid London, and home, and bed!—Let's all go to Vauxhall."

"What do you say, Mr. Jones?" inquired Lady Scapegrace, who was always ready for a lark. "You're our chaperon, you know; do you think you can be responsible?"

"Oh yes, John!" I exclaimed. "You promised to take me once before the end of the season; we shall never have such another chance."

"This is a capital night to go," remarked Frank, "because there is a new riding-woman, and you can take a lesson, Miss Coventry, in case you should wish to perform in public."

Cousin John could not possibly hold out against all three; and although I think in his heart he did not entirely approve, the carriage was ordered, the bill paid, and we were rolling along through the cool summer night *en route* for Vauxhall.

"My dear," said Lady Scapegrace to me, as we sidled through the entrance of that place of amusement, and the gentlemen remained behind to pay, "you are doing anything but what I told

you; scarcely three words have you spoken to your cousin, who, by the way, is very pleasant—I think I shall take him up, and improve him on my own account; but as for you, my dear, I can see plainly it's all over with you!"

"And you really leave town to-morrow?" said Frank, as we walked arm-in-arm up one of those shaded alleys, which lead to the Hermit, or the Gipsy, or some other excuse for a *tête-à-tête* not too much under the lamps.

By the way, why is it that a party never can keep together at Vauxhall? Lady Scapegrace and I had particularly stipulated that we were not to separate under any circumstances. "Whatever happens, do let us keep together," we mutually implored at least ten times during the first five minutes; and yet no sooner did we pair off arm-in-arm, than the distance began gradually to increase, till we found ourselves in couples, totally independent of each other's proceedings. In this manner we saw the horsemanship, and the acrobats, and the man with the globe, and all the other eccentricities of the circus. I really think I could have ridden quite as nicely as Madame Rose d'Amour, had I been mounted on an equally well-broken animal with the one which curveted and caracoled under that much-rouged and widely-smiling dame. They do look pretty, too, at a little distance, these histrionic horsewomen, with their trappings and their spangles, and their costume of Francis I. I often wonder whether

people really rode out hawking, got up so entirely regardless of expense, in the days of the Field of the Cloth of Gold. From the horsemanship we went to see the people dance, which they did with a degree of vigour and hilarity such as might be introduced in a modified form, with great advantage, into good society: and here we came across cousin John and Lady Scapegrace, just in time to witness a short and abrupt interview between the latter and Sir Guy. Yes—there was Sir Guy, with the flower in his mouth and all—dancing, actually dancing—and he can't be much less than sixty—with a little smart lady wearing the most brilliant colour, and the blackest eyelashes, and the reddest lips, and the lightest eyes I ever saw upon a human being. The little lady—whose hair, moreover, was dressed *à l'Impératrice*, thereby imparting additional boldness to a countenance not remarkable for modesty — frisked and whisked round Sir Guy with a vivacity that must have been of Parisian growth; whilst the baronet laboured ponderously along with true British determination, like a man who habitually wears very thick shoes, and is used to take his own time. In the course of his evolutions he brought his foot down heavily on the skirt of a lady's dress, and turning round to apologise found himself face to face with his wife! To do him justice he was not the least taken aback—anger rather than confusion seemed to be his dominant feeling; and although he tried to smother a rising oath in a laugh, or

rather a grin, it was such a muscular contraction of the mouth as does not give me the idea of a smile.

"Come out for a lark, too, my lady—hey?" said the baronet, studiously interposing his large person between "my lady" and his partner. "Reminds one of Paris; dance with anybody, whether one knows them or not;" and Sir Guy tried to look as if he was telling the truth, with indifferent success. But Lady Scapegrace's face was a perfect study; I never saw a countenance so expressive of scorn—intense scorn—and yet, as it seemed to me, not so much of him as of herself.

"I am glad you amuse yourself, Sir Guy," she said very quietly; but her lip was as white as ashes while she spoke. "I should think this place must suit you exactly.—Mr. Jones, we shall be late for the fireworks;" and she swept on, taking no further notice of the discomfited Sir Guy, whilst Frank and I followed in her wake, feeling rather awkward even at witnessing this ill-timed *rencontre*.

"And so you leave town to-morrow, Miss Coventry?" said Frank; and I thought his voice shook a little whilst he spoke. "I shall ride down Lowndes Street every day, and think how deserted it looks! No more walks in the morning for me—no more pleasant rides in the afternoons: I shall send my hacks home and sulk by myself, for I shall be miserable when my friends are gone. Do you

know, Miss Coventry,"—(I listened, all attention; how could I tell what he might *not* be going to say?)—"do you know that I have never had courage to ask you something till to-night?"—(Goodness! I thought, now it's coming, and my heart beat as it does when I'm going out hunting)—"I want you to give me"—(a lock of my hair, thinks I; well! I don't know—perhaps I may)—"I want you to give me—Miss Horsingham's receipt for making barley-water; but I know it's a long business to write out, and I'm afraid of being troublesome."

So that was all! was it? I felt half inclined to laugh, and more than half inclined to cry; but turning round, I was somewhat consoled to find Lady Scapegrace and her cavalier close behind us; and I do confess, I rather attributed Frank's extremely moderate request to their immediate vicinity: there was no opportunity, however, of renewing the subject. John had said all he had to say to his companion; John soon gets high and dry with these smart ladies, and they seem mutually tired of each other; so we got the carriage, and took our departure, Frank pressing my hand as he bade me farewell, and whispering "*Au revoir*, Miss Coventry; something tells me it won't be very long before we meet again."

What could he mean?

CHAPTER VIII

DANGERFIELD

IT was a melancholy work to glide out of London by the last train, and to think that one's gaieties were over for that summer, and that there was nothing to look forward to, till the hunting season, but Dangerfield, and Lady Horsingham, and the wearisome monotony of a regular country-house life. Aunt Deborah and I settled ourselves comfortably in a roomy first-class carriage, she with her knitting, and I with the last *Punch*—in which, by the way, was a portrait of a dandy, the very image of Frank Lovell—and prepared for our journey, as ladies generally do, by arranging multifarious outworks of smelling-bottles, shawls, reticules, parasols, etc., without which paraphernalia no well-bred woman can possibly travel a hundred yards. I confess I dreaded the trip. I was too well aware, by experience, that a railway always makes aunt Deborah rather cross, and me very sleepy; so I knew what was coming, and I was not disappointed. Before we had fairly left the outskirts of London, I saw, by the way in which my aunt laid down her knitting, and the ominous

cough or two in which she indulged, that I was in for a lecture; and sure enough, just as we emerged on the open fields, and began to smell the fresh country air, it began.

"Kate," said my aunt, "as we are going to a very regular and well-conducted establishment, I think it is a good opportunity for me to say a few words to you as regards your past conduct."

"Good gracious, aunt!" I replied, quite frightened, "what have I done?"

"My dear," said my aunt, "I have seen a great deal going on lately that I have taken no notice of; but it don't follow that I should approve of it, any more than John."

"And what has John got to do with it, I should like to know?" I rejoined, firing up on the instant, for such a chance of carrying the war into the enemy's country was not to be neglected,—"John, indeed! I'm sure, aunt, John encourages me in all my unfeminine pursuits, as you call them; and if he has been telling tales or setting you against me, I'll soon let him know what I think of such conduct—I'll soon tell him that I'm not going to be accountable to him; indeed, that I'm not going to"—

"Hush, my dear," said aunt Deborah, "there is no occasion for all this animosity against John. After all, it is very natural, poor fellow, that he should feel aggrieved and annoyed; there's that Captain Lovell—I don't mean to say that he's not an agreeable, well-informed young man,—but there he is coming to see you at all hours—riding

with you in the Park—whispering to you at the opera—bringing you new music, and old china, and fresh flowers : and conducting himself altogether as if he was either your accepted suitor or mine—and I don't think the latter very likely, Kate ; whereas, you know, John "— my aunt stopped short ; the ringing of the bell, and loud exclamations of "Trotter's Heath ! Trotter's Heath ! all out for Sheepshanks, Fleecyfold, and Market Muddlebury !" announced that we had arrived at the Muddlebury Junction ; and the opportune entrance into the carriage of a stranger, who seemed extremely anxious concerning the safety of a brace of pointers that accompanied him, effectually prevented my aunt from proceeding with her discourse ; while the dead silence which followed the renewed puffing of the engine, and the vibration of the train, gave me an opportunity of studying attentively the person and features of our new fellow-traveller.

I don't think I ever saw a man so freckled in my life ; even the backs of his hands (for he wore no gloves—I should think didn't even know *his number !*) were studded with spots, till you could have hardly put a pin's point on a free place from this horrid disfigurement. His face, too, was like a plum-pudding, on which the fruit had been showered with a most liberal hand ; but the features were good, and had it not been for his red hair, a little grizzled, and his stiff red whiskers, the bright blue eyes and white teeth would almost have entitled him to be considered handsome. He

had a strong stiff-built figure, about the middle size, well made for everything but dancing; and large useful feet encased in the stoutest double-soled shooting shoes. The latter articles of costume proved him at once to be a country gentleman. Everyone must have remarked this peculiarity in that enviable class. Their attire, particularly as regards the lower man, is invariably of a nature to defy the utmost inclemency of the weather, and is worn totally irrespective of the season, or the pursuit in which the owner may chance to be engaged at the time. But even independent of these tell-tales, the stranger's social position was easily enough discerned by the deference with which he was treated along the line, and the title of "squire," which greeted him from guards, porters, and bookkeepers at every station we passed.

So humane a master of dumb animals, or one so fidgety as to their welfare, I never came across; and this, I confess, prepossessed me in his favour. Every time the train stopped, out jumped our fellow-traveller, and off he went to a certain van containing his treasures, from which he emerged with a very red face, and a constantly repeated apology for disturbing me on his return to his seat. Despite of his thick shoes and his freckles, I could see the man was a gentleman; but, dear me! what a contrast to the smart gentlemen I had lately been accustomed to meet! Beyond a "Beg your pardon, I fear I am very much in your way," accompanied by such a vivid blush as can be performed only by

a red-haired man, the squire did not venture on any communication either with me or my aunt; and with the latter's lecture fresh in my mind, I did not, as may be supposed, dare to take the initiative by dropping my gloves, or pretending I couldn't pull up the window, or any other little ladylike manœuvre which lays the foundation of a temporary intimacy, and often furnishes one with an agreeable hour's conversation. I cannot see why one should sit mum opposite the same person for miles, merely because one has never been introduced.

When we arrived at length at the Dangerfield Station, where Lady Horsingham's emblazoned coach and fat horses were in waiting for us, the squire, who was here treated with a deference bordering on idolatry, got out too. He made an involuntary motion with his hand, as though he would have taken his hat off, and wished us good-morning; but his shyness got the better of him, and he disappeared from the platform, entangled amongst his dumb favourites, with a blush that was visible even at the back of his head, where the tips of his ears met the rim of his white hat. As we toiled up the sandy lane leading from Dangerfield Station to Dangerfield Park, we were overtaken by a smart, high dogcart, drawn by a clever, raking-looking bay mare, and driven by the owner of the freckles, the pointers, and the white hat.

"Bachelor, my dear," said aunt Deborah, as he

whisked by; "and not at all a bad-looking man either."

"How do you know he's a bachelor, aunt?" I naturally inquired.

"Common-sense, my dear," replied aunt Deborah sententiously. "I judge of people by their belongings,—no lady could get into that dogcart without dirtying her dress against the wheel; and if he had a wife, that handsome bay horse would go with another in her carriage, instead of his. Besides, he wouldn't be so fond of his pointers if he had anything else to care for; and above all, Kate," added my aunt conclusively, "his silk handkerchief wasn't hemmed, and he'd a button wanting in the front of his shirt."

All my life I have had a sinking at my heart when I have heard the ring at that great Dangerfield front door-bell. It was better in my poor uncle's time, for he would have made any place lively; but since his death, the park has relapsed into its natural solemnity; and I am quite sure, that if ever I do go into a convent, my sensations will be exactly like those which I have always experienced when visiting aunt Horsingham. The moat alone is enough to give one the blues; but, in addition to that, the thick horse-chestnuts grow up to the very windows, and dark Scotch firs shed a gloom all over the park. Dangerfield is one of those places that seem always to be in the shade. How the strawberries ever ripen, or the flowers ever bloom, or the birds ever sing there, is to me a

mystery. Outside there are dark walks, and yew hedges, and cypresses, and here and there a copper beech, with lawns that are never mown, and copses that are never thinned, to say nothing of that stagnant moat, with its sombre and prolific vegetation; whilst within, black oak wainscoting, and heavy tapestry, and winding staircases, and small deep-set windows, and oddly shaped rooms, with steps at the door like going down into a bath, and floors considerably up and down hill, and queer recesses that frighten one out of one's wits to go into, form altogether a domicile that would tame the wildest merry-andrew, in a fortnight, into as staid and sober and stupid a personage as the veriest Lady Superior could desire. Aunt Horsingham received us as usual, with a freezing smile.

"How do you do, Kate?" said she, putting two of her cold bony fingers into my hand. "I'm afraid you will find it rather dull here, after London; but it is wholesome for young people to be occasionally sobered a little."

Aunt Horsingham is tall and thin, with a turn-up nose, rather red at the point, a back that never stoops, and a grim smile that never varies. She dresses in bright colours, affecting strange and startling contrasts, both of hues and material. Her hands are always cold, and seldom clean; and she has sundry uncomfortable notions about damping the spirits of youth, and checking the exuberance of its gaiety, which render her a perfect terror and bugbear to the rising generation.

When I was a little thing, laughing, prattling, and giggling, as children will, an admonishing look from my aunt, with a gaunt finger held aloft, and a cold "Kate, don't be silly, my dear," was always sufficient to make me dull and gloomy for the rest of the day. I should like to know, indeed, why children are not to be silly? Are grown-up people always so rational in their amusements, or irreproachable in their demeanour?

"Let the child alone," poor uncle Harry used to say; and once I overheard him mutter, "I've more patience with a young fool than an old one."

Such training has not had a good effect on cousin Amelia. She has been so constantly tutored to conceal her emotions, and to adopt the carriage and manners of an automaton, that the girl is now a complete hypocrite. It is quite impossible to make her out. If you tickled her, I don't believe you could get her to laugh; and if you struck her, I very much doubt whether she would cry. My aunt calls it self-command; I call it imbecility. She shook hands with me in her provokingly patronising manner—"hoped I had brought my horses with me" (as if I was coming to spend months at Dangerfield without Brilliant!); "supposed I had my side-saddle in the capbox;" and showed me my room, without so much as a single kind word of welcome or a cousinly caress. It was quite a relief to help dear aunt Deborah to unpack her dressing-case, and kiss her pleasant face, and give her the warm cup of tea, without

which aunt Deborah never dreams of dressing for dinner.

Oh! those solemn, heavy, silent, stupid dinners, with the massive plate, and the dark oak wainscoting, and the servants gliding about like ghosts at a festival in Acheron—what a relief it would have been even to have had a clownish footman spill soup over one's dress, or ice-cream down one's back, or anything to break the monotony of the entertainment! But no! there we sat, aunt Horsingham remarking that the weather was dull, and the crops looking very unpromising; aunt Deborah with her eyes fixed on a portrait of the late Mr. David Jones, as a boy, opposite which she invariably took her place, and on which, though representing an insignificant urchin in a high frill and blue jacket, she gazed intently during the whole repast; cousin Amelia looking at herself in the silver dish-covers, and when those were removed relapsing into a state of irritable torpor; and as for poor me!—all I could do was to think over the pleasures of the past season, and dwell rather more than I should otherwise have done on the image of Frank Lovell, and the very agreeable acquisition he would have been to such a party. And then the evenings were, if possible, worse than the dinners—work, work, work—mum, mum, mum—till tea; and after tea, aunt Horsingham would read to us, in her dry harsh voice, long passages from the *Spectator*, very excellent articles from the *Rambler*, highly interesting in their day,

no doubt, but which lose some of their point after an interval of nearly a century ; or, worse than all, Pope's *Homer*, or Cowper's *Task*, running the lines into each other, so as to avoid what she called the sing-song of the rhymes, till the poet's effusions sounded like the most extraordinary prose, cut into lengths, as we ladies should say, for no earthly purpose but to make nonsense of the whole thing. Her ladyship never went to bed till eleven ; so there, having dined at half-past six to a minute, we were forced to sit three mortal hours and a half, swallowing yawns, and repressing that inexplicable disorder termed the fidgets, till the welcome bed-candles arrived. No wonder men drink and smoke, and commit all sorts of enormities, to fill up those dreadful hours after dinner! I think if ever I take to tobacco, it will be at Dangerfield.

Then, of course, the Hall was haunted ; and, of course, my passage was the one which the ghost particularly affected. It was a sad story that of the Dangerfield ghost. I have got it all out of aunt Deborah at different times ; and though I don't exactly believe in the spectre, I can't help sometimes crying over the incidents. The fact is, the Horsinghams were quite as proud of their ghost as they were of their hand ; and although not a very creditable tale to any of the family, aunt Deborah would never forgive me if I were not to relate the tragedy which conferred on Dangerfield the honour of being a haunted house.

In the reign of George II., the head of the house, Sir Hugh Horsingham, married a young wife, and brought her home to Dangerfield, with the usual demonstrations and rejoicings peculiar to such an event. Sir Hugh was a dark, morose man, considerably older than his bride—stern and forbidding in his manners, but possessing deep feelings under a reserved exterior, and a courage and determination not to be daunted or subdued. Such a man was capable of great things, for good or for evil; and such was the very nature on which a woman's influence might have produced the most beneficial results. But, unfortunately, young Lady Horsingham had but one feeling for her lord, and that was intense terror of his anger. She never sought to win his confidence—she never entered into his political schemes, his deeper studies, or even his country amusements and pursuits; all she thought of was how to avoid offending Sir Hugh; and ere long this one idea grew to such a pitch, that she quite trembled in his presence, could scarcely answer distinctly when he spoke to her, and seemed hardly to draw breath in freedom save when out of his sight. Such a state of things could have but one ending—distrust and suspicion on one side, unqualified aversion on the other. A marriage, never of inclination (as, indeed, in those days amongst great families few marriages were), became an insupportable slavery ere the first year of wedded life had elapsed; and by the time an heir was born to the house of Horsingham, prob-

ably there was no unhappier couple within fifty miles of Dangerfield than dark Sir Hugh and his pretty, fair-haired, gentle wife. No! she ought never to have married him at all. It was but the night before her wedding that she walked in the garden of her father's old manor-house with a bright, open-hearted, handsome youth, whose brow wore that expression of acute agony which it is so pitiable to witness on a young countenance, that look almost of physical pain, which betokens how the iron has indeed entered the sufferer's soul.

Ah, you may plead, cousin Edward; but we women are of a strange mixture, and the weakest of us may possess obstinacy such as no earthly consideration can overcome.

"Lucy! Lucy! for the last time, think of it—for the love of Heaven, do not drive me mad—think of it once more—it is the last, last chance!"

The speaker was white as a sheet, and his hollow voice came in hoarse, inarticulate whispers, as he looked almost fiercely into that dear face to read his doom. Too well he knew the set, fixed expression of her delicate profile. She did not dare turn towards him; she could not have looked him in the face and persevered; but she kept her eyes fastened on the horizon, as though she saw her future in the fading sunset; and whilst her heart seemed turning to very stone, she kept her lips firmly closed; she repressed the tears that would have choked her, and so for that time she conquered.

Lucy had a great idea of duty; hers was no high-principled love of duty from the noblest motives, but a morbid dread of self-reproach. She had not character enough to do anything out of her own notions of the beaten track. She had promised her father she would marry Sir Hugh Horsingham —not that he had the slightest right to exact such a promise—and she felt bound to fulfil it. She never remembered the injury she was doing cousin Edward, the right which such devotion as his ought to have given him. She knew she loved him better than anyone in the world; she knew she was about to commit an act of the greatest injustice towards Sir Hugh; but she had "promised papa," and though she would have given worlds to avoid fulfilling her compact, she had not strength of mind to break the chain and be free.

Cousin Edward! cousin Edward! you should have carried her off then and there; she would have been truly grateful for the rest of her life, but she would have died sooner than open her lips. He was hurt — reckless — almost savage. He thought her sullen.

"Once more, Lucy," he said, and his eye glared fiercely in the waning light—"once more, will you give me one word, or never set eyes on me again?"

Her lip never moved.

"I give you till we pass that tree"—he looked dangerous now — "and then"—he swore a great oath—"I leave you for ever!"

Lucy thought the tree looked strange and ghastly in the rising moon; she even remarked a knot upon its smooth white stem; but she held out whilst one might have counted ten; and when she turned round, poor girl! cousin Edward was gone.

CHAPTER IX

HANDSOME NED

SO the bells rang merrily at Dangerfield, and the rustics huzzaed for their landlord, and the comely village maidens envied the bride; and Lucy was Lady Horsingham now, with new duties and a high position, and a large, fine, gloomy house, and jewels in her hair, and an aching heart in her bosom. Nevertheless, she determined to do her duty as a wife; and every hour of the day she resolved not to think of cousin Edward.

Years elapsed, and pretty Lucy became a gentle, handsome woman—kindly, courteous, and beloved by all, timid and shrinking only from Sir Hugh. Her husband, wearied and discontented, mixed himself fiercely in all the intrigues of the day—became a staunch partisan of the house of Stuart, and sought for excitement abroad in proportion as he missed congeniality of feeling at home. It was an unhappy household. Their one child was the mother's sole consolation; she scarcely ever let it out of her presence. They were a pretty sight, that loving couple, as they basked in the sun of a fine summer's morning,

on the terrace in front of the manor house—the boy, with his mother's blue eyes and his own golden curls, and the arch, merry smile that he never got from stern Sir Hugh; and the fair, graceful woman, with her low white brow, and her soft brown hair, and her quiet gestures, and gentle sorrowing face—that face that haunts poor cousin Edward still.

"Mamma!" says the urchin, pouting his rosy lips, "why don't you play with me?—what are you thinking of?" and a shade passes over that kind face, and she blushes, though there is no one with her but the child, and catches him up and smothers him in kisses, and says, "*You*, my darling"; but nevertheless, I do not think at that moment she was thinking either of her boy or Sir Hugh.

And where was cousin Edward all the time? Why, at that particular instant, sword-point to sword-point with Colonel Bludyer of the Dragoons, slightly wounded in two places — cool and wary, and seeming to enjoy, with a sort of fierce pleasure, such a safety-valve for excitement as a duel with one of the best fencers in Europe.

Cousin Edward was an altered man since he stood with the future Lady Horsingham in the moonlight. "An evil counsellor is despair;" and he had hugged that grim adviser to his heart. He had grown handsomer, indeed, than ever; but the wild eye, the haggard brow, and the deep lines about his mouth, spoke of days spent in fierce excitement—nights passed in reckless dissipation.

He had never forgotten Lucy through it all, but even her image only goaded him to fresh extravagances — anything to deaden the sting of remembrance — anything to efface the maddening past! So cousin Edward, too, became a Jacobite; and was there a daring scheme to be executed, a foolhardy exploit to be performed, life and limb to be risked without a question—who so ready and so reckless as "handsome Ned Meredith"?

In the course of their secret meetings and cabals, he became slightly acquainted with Sir Hugh Horsingham; and, with the inexplicable infatuation peculiar to a man in love, he took a pleasure in being near one so closely connected with Lucy, although that one was the very person who had deprived him of all he valued on earth. So it fell out that Sir Hugh Horsingham and Ned Meredith were supping at the Rose and Thistle, in close alliance, the table adjoining them being occupied by those staunch Hanoverians, Colonel Bludyer and Mr. Thornton.

"Here's 'the Blackbird,'"[1] said cousin Edward, tossing off a huge goblet of Bordeaux, and looking round the room with an air of defiance as he proposed so well-known a toast. Sir Hugh was a man of a certain grim humour, and as he drained his goblet and nodded to his companion, he added, "May the rats dance to his whistle, and the devil—that's you, Ned—take the hindmost!"

[1] One of the many passwords by which the adherents of the Chevalier distinguished that ill-fated Prince.

Colonel Bludyer rose from his chair, placed his cocked hat on his head, and turned the buckle of his sword-belt in front. "The King!" he shouted, raising his hat with one hand and filling a bumper with the other. "The King!" he repeated, scowling fiercely at his two neighbours.

"Over the water!" roared Ned Meredith; and the colonel, turning rapidly round, and mistaking his man, flung his cocked-hat right in Sir Hugh Horsingham's face. Swords were out in a second —thrust, parry, and return passed like lightning, but the bystanders separated the combatants; and Meredith, determining for the sake of Lucy that Sir Hugh should encounter no unnecessary danger, took the whole quarrel on himself, and arranged a meeting for the following morning with the redoubtable Colonel Bludyer. Thus it was that while Lucy and her boy were basking in the summer sunshine, cousin Edward was exhausting all his knowledge of swordsmanship in vain endeavours to get within that iron colonel's guard. The duel was fought on the ground now occupied by Leicester Square, Sir Hugh and Mr. Thornton officiating as seconds, though, the latter being disabled from the effects of a recent encounter, they did not, as was usual in those days, fight to the death, merely *pour se désennuyer*. Stripped to their shirts — in breeches and silk stockings, with no shoes—the antagonists lunged, and glared, and panted, and twice paused for breath by mutual consent, with no further damage than two slight wounds in Ned's sword-arm.

"Very pretty practice," said Mr. Thornton, coolly taking a pinch of snuff, and offering his box to Sir Hugh; "I'm in despair at not being able to oblige you this fine morning."

"Some other time," replied Sir Hugh, with a grim smile; "d——ation," he added, "Ned's down!"

Sure enough, cousin Edward was on the grass, striving in vain to raise himself, and gasping out that he "wasn't the least hurt." He had got it just between the ribs, and was trying to stanch the blood with a delicate laced handkerchief, in a corner of which, had he examined it closely, Sir Hugh would have found embroidered the well-known name of "Lucy." Poor cousin Edward! it was all he had belonging to his lost love, and he would have been unwilling to die without that fragment of lace in his hand.

"A very promising fencer," remarked Colonel Bludyer, as he wiped his rapier on the grass. "If he ever gets over it, he won't forget that *plongeant* thrust in tierce. I never knew it fail, Thornton—never, with a man under thirty."

So the colonel put his coat on, and drove off to breakfast; while Sir Hugh took charge of Ned Meredith, and as soon as he was recovered—for his wound was not mortal—carried him down with him to get thoroughly well at Dangerfield Hall.

It is an old, old story! Love, outraged and set at defiance, bides his time, and takes his revenge. Dangerfield looked like a different place now, so thought Lucy; and her spirits rose, and the colour

came back to her cheek, and she even summoned courage to speak without hesitating to Sir Hugh. When cousin Edward was strong enough to limp about the house, it seemed that glimpses of sunshine brightened those dark oak rooms; and ere he was able to take the air, once more leaning on Lucy's arm, alas! alas! he had become even dearer to the impassioned thoughtful woman than ever he was to the timid vacillating girl. There was an addition now to the party on the terrace in the bright autumn mornings, but the little boy needed no longer to ask mamma "what she was thinking of"; and the three would have seemed to a careless observer a happy family party—husband, wife, and child. Oh, that it could but have been so!

In the meantime Sir Hugh was again, as usual, busied with his state intrigues and party politics, and absented himself for weeks together from the Hall; riding post to London night and day, returning at all sorts of unexpected hours, leaving again at a moment's notice, and otherwise comporting himself in his usual mysterious reserved manner. Yet those who knew him best opined there was something wrong about Sir Hugh. He was restless and preoccupied; his temper less easily excited about trifles than was his wont, but perfectly ungovernable when once he gave way to it. No man dared to question him. He had not a friend in the world who would have ventured to offer him a word of advice or consolation, but it was evident to his servants and his intimates that Sir Hugh

was ill at ease. Who can tell the struggles that rent that strong, proud heart? Who could see beneath that cold surface, and read the intense feelings of love, hatred, jealousy, or revenge that smouldered below, stifled and kept down by the iron will, the stubborn indomitable pride? There is a deep meaning in the legend of that Spartan boy, who suffered the stolen fox to gnaw his very vitals, the while he covered him with his tunic, and preserved on his brave face a smile of unconcern. Most of us have a stolen fox somewhere; but the weak nature writhes and moans, and is delivered from its torment; while the bold unflinching spirit preserves a gallant bearing before the world, and scorns to be relieved from the fangs that are draining its very life away.

Whatever Sir Hugh saw or suspected, he said not a word to Lucy, nor was it until surmise had become certainty that he forbade cousin Edward the house. To him he would not condescend to explain his motives; he simply wrote to him to say, that on his return he should expect to find his guest had departed, and that he had sufficient reasons for requesting his visits might not be repeated. With his wife he was, if possible, more austere and morose than ever; so, once more, the Hall resumed its old aspect of cheerlessness and desolation, and its mistress went moping about, more than ever miserable and broken-hearted. Such a state of things could not long go on: the visits forbidden openly took place by stealth, and

the climax rapidly approached which was to result in the celebrated Dangerfield tragedy.

At this period there was set on foot another of those determined plots which, during the first two reigns of the House of Hanover, so constantly harassed that dynasty. Sir Hugh, of course, was a prime mover of the conspiracy, and was much in London and elsewhere, gathering intelligence, raising funds, and making converts to his opinions. Ned Meredith—having, it is to be presumed, all his energies occupied in his own private intrigues—had somewhat withdrawn of late from the Jacobite party; and Sir Hugh heard, with his grim, unmoved smile, many a jest and innuendo levelled at the absentee.

One stormy winter's evening, the baronet, well armed, cloaked, and booted, left his own house for the metropolis accompanied by one trusty servant. He was bearing papers of importance, and was hurrying on to lay them, with the greatest despatch, before his fellow-conspirators. As the night was drawing on, Sir Hugh's horse shied away from a wild figure, looming like some spectre in the fading light; and ere he had forced the animal back into the path, his bridle was caught by a half-naked lad, whom the rider at once recognised as an emissary he had often before employed to be the bearer of secret intelligence, and who, under an affectation of being half-witted, concealed much shrewdness of observation, and unimpeachable fidelity to the cause.

"Whip and spur, Sir Hugh—whip and spur," said the lad, who seemed flustered and confused with drink; "you may burst your best horse betwixt this and London, and all to get there before you're wanted. A dollar to drink, Sir Hugh, like Handsome Ned gave me this morning—a dollar to drink, and I'll save you a journey for the sake of the bonny white rose, and the bird with the yellow bill."

Sir Hugh scrutinised the lad with a piercing eye, flung him a crown from his purse, and bade him "out with what he had to say, for that he himself was hurried, and must push on to further the good cause." The lad was sobered in an instant.

"Look ye here, Sir Hugh," he said eagerly; "Handsome Ned went down the road at a gallop this morning. There's something brewing in London, you may trust me, Sir Hugh, and I tried to stop him to learn his errand; but he tossed me a crown, and galloped on. He took the hill-road, Sir Hugh, and you came up the vale; but he's bound for Dangerfield, I know, and mayhap he's got papers that will save your journey to London. No offence, Sir Hugh," added the lad, for the baronet's face was black as midnight.

"None, my good boy," was the reply, in a hoarse thick voice. "Hold, there's another crown for you—drink it every farthing, you villain! or I never give you a sixpence again;" and Sir Hugh rode on, as though bound for London, but stopped a mile farther forward, at a place where two roads

met; and entrusting his papers to his servant, bade him hasten on with them, whilst he galloped back through the darkness in the direction of his home.

Home, indeed! Had it ever been home to Sir Hugh? Would it be home to-night? When he got back there, and skulked into his own house like a midnight thief—what would he do?—why was he galloping so fast? Sir Hugh set his teeth tight, and holding his powerful horse hard by the head, urged him on faster than before. The lights are all out in the little village of which he is sole master, and his horse's hoofs clattering through the street, rouse the sleepy inmates for an instant, ere they return to their peaceful rest. Sir Hugh is not sleepy—he feels as if he never should want to sleep again.

How dark it is in the park, under those huge old trees! He fastens his horse to one of the drooping branches, and after removing his pistols from their holsters, spreads his cloak over the heaving flanks of the heated animal. Habit is second nature, and he does not forget the good horse. He strides through the shrubberies, and across Lucy's garden, crushing with his heavy boot-heel the last flower that had lingered on into the winter. There is a light streaming from one of the windows in the gallery. Ha!—he *may* be right—he may not have returned in vain. For an instant a feeling of sickness comes over him, and he learns for the first time that he had cherished a hope he might be deceived.

"Double-locked the door behind him"

He can let himself in by the garden-gate with his own pass-key. Ere he is aware he is tramping up the corridor in his heavy horseman's boots—his hand is on the door—there is a woman's shriek—and Sir Hugh's tall dark figure fills the doorway of Lucy's sitting-room, where, alas! she is not alone, for the stern, angry husband is confronted by Ned Meredith!

Lucy cowers down in a corner of the room, with her face buried in her hands. Cousin Edward draws himself up to his full height, and looks his antagonist steadily in the face, but with an expression of calm despair, that seems to say Fate has now done her worst. Sir Hugh is cool, collected, and polite; nay, he can even smile; but he speaks strangely, almost in a whisper, and hisses through his set teeth. He has double-locked the door behind him, and turns to cousin Edward with a grave, courteous bow.

"You have done me the honour of an unexpected visit, Mr. Meredith," he says; "I trust Lady Horsingham has entertained you hospitably! Pray do not stir, madam. Mr. Meredith, we are now quits; you saved my life when you encountered Colonel Bludyer; I forbore from taking yours, when I had proofs that it was my right. We have now entered on a fresh account, but the game shall be fairly played. Mr. Meredith, you are a man of honour—yes, it shall be fairly played."

Ned's lip quivered, but he bowed and stood perfectly still.

"Lady Horsingham," continued Sir Hugh, "be good enough to hand me those tables; they contain a dice-box. Nay, Mr. Meredith," seeing Ned about to assist the helpless, frightened woman; "when *present*, at least, I expect my wife to obey me."

Lucy was forced to rise, and, trembling in every limb, to present the tables to her lord. Sir Hugh placed the dice-box on the table, laid his pistols beside it, and, taking a seat, motioned to cousin Edward to do the same.

"You are a man of honour, Mr. Meredith," he repeated; "we will throw three times, and the highest caster shall blow the other's brains out."

Lucy shrieked and rushed to the door: it was fast, and her husband forced her to sit down and watch the ghastly game.

"Good God, Sir Hugh!" exclaimed cousin Edward, "this is too horrible—for your wife's sake—any reparation I can make, I will; but this is murder, deliberate murder!"

"You are a man of honour, Mr. Meredith," reiterated Sir Hugh; "I ask for no reparation but this—the chances are equal if the stakes are high. You are my guest, or rather, I should say, *Lady Horsingham's guest.* Begin."

Cousin Edward's face turned ghastly pale: he took the box, shook it, hesitated, but the immovable eye was fixed on him; the stern lips repeated once more, "You are a man of honour," and he threw—"Four." It was now Sir Hugh's turn. With a

courteous bow he received the box, and threw—"Seven." Again the adversaries cast, the one a six, the other a three; and now they were even in the ghastly match. Once more cousin Edward shook the box, and the leaping dice turned up—"Eleven." Lucy's white face stood out in the lamplight, as she watched with stony eyes that seemed to have lost the very power of sight.

"For God's sake, forego this frightful determination, Sir Hugh," pleaded cousin Edward; "take my life in a fair field. I will offer no resistance; but you can hardly expect to outdo my throw, and nothing shall induce *me* to take advantage of it: think better of it, Sir Hugh, I entreat you."

"You are a man of honour, Mr. Meredith, and so am I," was the only reply, as Sir Hugh brandished the box aloft, and thundered it down on the table—"Sixes!" "Good casting," he remarked; and at the same instant, cocking the pistol nearest to him, discharged it full into his antagonist's bosom. The bullet sped through a delicate lace handkerchief, which he always wore there, straight and true into cousin Edward's heart. As he fell forward across the table, a dark stream flowed slowly, slowly along the carpet, till it dyed the border of Lucy's white dress with a crimson stain. She was on her knees, apparently insensible; but one small hand felt the cold wet contact, and she looked at it, and saw that it was blood. Once more she uttered a shriek that rang through those vast buildings, and rushed again to the door to find

it locked. In sheer despair she made for the window, threw open the casement, and, ere Sir Hugh could seize or stop her, flung herself headlong into the court below. When the horrified husband looked down into the darkness, a wisp of white garments, a bruised and lifeless body, was all that remained of Lady Horsingham.

That night one half of Dangerfield Hall was consumed by fire. Its mistress was said to have perished in the flames. The good neighbours, the honest country-people, pitied poor Sir Hugh, galloping back from London, to find his house in ruins and his wife a corpse. His gay companions missed Ned Meredith from his usual haunts; but it was generally supposed he had obtained a mission to the Court of St. Germains, and there was a rumour that he had perished in a duel with a French marquis. A certain half-witted lad, who had followed Sir Hugh back to Dangerfield on that fearful night, might have elucidated the mystery; but he had been kidnapped, and sent to the plantations. After many years he returned to England, and on his deathbed left a written statement, implicating Sir Hugh in the double crime of arson and murder. But long ere this the culprit had appeared before the tribunal which admits of no prevarication, and the pretty boy with the golden curls had become Lord of Dangerfield Hall. The long corridor had been but partially destroyed. It was repaired and refurnished by successive generations; but guests

and servants alike refuse to sleep again in that dreary wing, after the first trial. Every night, so surely as the old clock tolled out the hour of twelve, a rush of feet was heard along the passage —a window looking into the court was thrown open—a piercing scream from a woman's voice rang through the building—and those who were bold enough to look out averred that they beheld a white figure leap wildly into the air and disappear. Some even went so far as to affirm that drops of blood, freshly sprinkled, were found every morning on the pavement of the court. But no one ever doubted the Dangerfield ghost to be the nightly apparition of Lucy, Lady Horsingham. At length, in my grandfather's time, certain boards being lifted to admit of fresh repairs in the accursed corridor, the silver-mounted guard of a rapier, the stock and barrel of a pistol, with a shred of lace, on which the letter "L" was yet visible, were discovered by the workmen. They are in existence still. Whatever other remains accompanied them turned to dust immediately on exposure to the air. That dust was, however, religiously collected and buried in a mausoleum appropriated to the Horsinghams. Since then the ghost has been less troublesome; but most of the family have seen or heard it at least once in their lives. I confess, that if ever I lie awake at Dangerfield till the clock strikes twelve, I invariably stop my ears, and bury my head under the bedclothes for at least a quarter of an hour. By these means I have

hitherto avoided any personal acquaintance with the spectre; but nothing on earth would induce me to walk down that corridor at midnight, and risk a private interview with the Dangerfield ghost.

CHAPTER X

SQUIRE HAYCOCK

S for spending a whole morning in the drawing-room with the ladies, it is what I cannot and will not submit to. Working and scandal, scandal and working, from half-past ten till two, is more than I can stand; so, the very first morning I was at Dangerfield, I resolved to break the chain at once, and do as I always meant to do for the future. Accordingly, immediately after breakfast I popped my bonnet on —the lavender one, that had done a good deal of London work, but was still quite good enough for the country—and started off for a walk by myself, confiding my intentions to no one: as I well knew, if I did, I should have aunt Deborah's "Kate, *pray* don't overheat yourself, my dear. Do wrap yourself up, and take care not to catch cold"; and Lady Horsingham's sarcastic smile, and "In *my* time, Miss Coventry, young ladies were not in the habit of trailing all over the country by themselves; but I

expect soon to hear of their farming, and fishing, and shooting, I shouldn't wonder—not worse than hunting, at anyrate. However, I say nothing"; and cousin Amelia, with her lackadaisical sneer, and her avowal that "she was not *equal* to walking," and her offer to "go as far as the garden with me in the afternoon." So I tripped down the back staircase, and away to the stables, with a bit of sugar for Brilliant, who had arrived safely by the train, in company with White Stockings; and on through the kitchen garden and the home-farm up to the free, fresh, breezy down.

I do enjoy a walk by myself, and it was the last chance I should have of one; for cousin John was expected that very day, and when cousin John and I are anywhere, of course we are inseparable. But I am sure an occasional stroll quite by one's self does one more good than anything. I think of such quantities of things that never occur to me at other times—fairies, brigands, knights, and damsels, and all sorts of wild adventures; and I feel so brave and determined, as if I could face anything in a right cause, and so *good*, and I make such excellent resolutions, and walk faster and faster, and get more and more romantic, like a goose, as I know I am.

Well, it was a beautiful morning, early in autumn—blue sky, light fleecy clouds, a sharp clear air from the north—the low country studded with corn-ricks, and alive with reapers, and cart-teams, and cattle: a green valley below me, rich in fine old timber, and clothed with high, thick hedgerows,

"I beg your pardon a million times"

concealing the sluggish river that stole softly away, and only gleamed out here and there to light up the distance; whilst above and around me stretched far and wide the vast expanse of down, cutting sharply against the sky, and dwarfing to mere shrubs the clumps of old fir-trees that relieved its magnificent monotony. I was deep in a day-dream, and an imaginary conversation with Frank Lovell — in which I was running over with much mental eloquence what I should say, and what he would say, and what I should reply to that—when a shrill whistle caused me to start and turn suddenly round, whilst at the same instant a great black retriever bounced up against my legs, and two handsome pointers raced by me as if just emancipated from the kennel. The consequence of all this was, that I stepped hastily on a loose stone, turned my foot the wrong way under me, and came down with a slightly sprained ankle, and the black retriever, an animal of exceedingly noisome breath, affectionately licking my face.

"Down, Juno!—I beg your pardon a million times!—Get down, you bitch!—How shall I ever apologise?—Confound you, get down!" said an agitated voice above me; and looking up, I espied the red-haired stranger of the railway, dressed in a most conspicuous shooting-costume, white hat and all, whose dogs had been the means of bringing me thus suddenly to the earth, and on whom I was now dependent for succour and support till I should be able to reach home.

In such an emergency, my new friend was not half so confused and shy as I should have expected. He seemed to summon all his energies to consider what was best to be done; and as my foot pained me considerably when I tried to walk (particularly downhill), he made no more ado, but lifted me carefully in his arms, and proceeded incontinently to carry me off in the direction of Dangerfield Hall, where he seemed intuitively to know I was at present residing.

It was, to say the least of it, an unusual situation. A man I had never seen but once before in my life—and here was I lying in his arms (precious weight he must have found me!) and looking up in his face like a child in its nurse's, and the usages of society making it incumbent on us both to attempt a sort of indifferent conversation about the weather, and the country, and the beauty of the scenery, which the juxtaposition of our respective faces rendered ludicrous in the extreme.

"A tempting day for a walk, Miss—ah—ah" (he didn't know my name—how should he?—and was now beginning to get very red, partly from the return of his constitutional shyness, and partly from the severity of his exertions). "I hope your foot does not pain you quite so much; be good enough to lean a little more this way." Poor man, how his arms must have ached! Whilst I replied somewhat in this fashion: "Thank you, I'm better; I shall soon be able to walk, I think: this is indeed a lovely country. Don't you find

me very heavy?" "I think I could carry you a good many miles," he said quietly; and then seemed so shocked at such an avowal, that he hardly opened his lips again, and put me down the very first time I asked him, and offered me his arm with an accession of confusion that made me feel quite awkward myself. Truth to tell, my ankle was not sprained, only twisted; and when the immediate pain wore off, I was pretty sound again, and managed, with the assistance of my new acquaintance's arm, to make a very good walk of it. So we plodded on quite sociably towards the Hall, and my friend took leave of me at the farm with a polite bow, and a sort of hesitating manner that most shy men possess, and which would lead one to infer they have always got something more to say that never *is* said. I knew I should be well scolded if I avowed my accident to any of the family; besides, I did not quite fancy facing all the inquiries as to how I got home, and cousin Amelia's sneers about errant damsels and wandering knights; so I stole quietly up to my room, bathed my foot in eau-de-Cologne, and remained *perdue* till dinner-time, in despite of repeated messages from my aunts, and the arrival of cousin John.

People may talk about country pleasures and country duties, and all the charms of country life; but it appears to me that a good many things are done under the titles of pleasure and duty which belong in reality to neither; and that

those who live entirely in the country inflict on themselves a great variety of unnecessary disagreeables, as they lose a great many of its chief delights. Of all receipts for weariness, commend me to a dinner-party of country neighbours by daylight—people who know each other just well enough to have opposite interests and secret jealousies—who arrive ill at ease in their smart dresses, to sit through a protracted meal with hot servants and forced conversation, till one young lady on her promotion being victimised at the pianoforte, enables them to yawn unobserved; and welcome ten o'clock brings round the carriage and tipsy coachman, in order that they may enter on their long, dark, dreary drive home through lanes and byways, which is only endurable from the consideration that the annual ordeal has been accomplished, and that they need not do it again till this time next year.

There was a dinner-party at Dangerfield regularly once a month, and this was the day. Aunt Horsingham was great on these occasions, astonishing the neighbours as much with her London dresses as did cousin Amelia with her London manners. We all assembled a few minutes earlier than usual in the drawing-room, so as to be ready to receive our guests, and great was the infliction on poor aunt Deborah and my humble self. How they trooped in, one after another!—Sir Brian and Lady Banneret, and Master Banneret, and two Misses Banneret, these were the great cards of the party, so Lady

Horsingham kissed Lady Banneret and the young ladies, and opined Master Banneret was *grown*, much to the indignation of that young gentleman, who, being an Oxonian, of course considered himself a man. Sir Brian was a good-humoured jolly old boy, with a loud laugh, and stood with his coat-tails lifted, and his back to the empty fireplace, in perfect ease and contentment. Not so his lady; first she scrutinised everything Lady Horsingham had got on; then she took a review of the furniture, and specially marked one faded place in the carpet; lastly, she turned a curious and disappointed glance on myself. I accounted for the latter mark of displeasure by the becoming shade of my gown; I knew it was a pretty one, and would meet with feminine censure accordingly.

The Bannerets were soon followed by Mr. and Mrs. Plumridge, a newly married couple, who were fêted accordingly. Mr. Plumridge was a light-haired unmeaning-looking individual, partially bald, with a blue coat and white satin neckcloth; his bride a lively, sarcastic, black-eyed little woman, who must have married him for her own convenience—they said afterwards, she was once a governess; but at all events she held her own handsomely when alone with the ladies after dinner, and partly from good-humour, partly from an exceedingly off-hand natural manner, forced even Lady Banneret to be civil to her. Then came the Marmadukes and the Marygolds, and old Miss Finch in a sedan-chair from the adjoining

village, and a goodish-looking man whose name I never made out, and Mr. Sprigges the curate; and lastly, in a white heat and a state of utter confusion, my shy acquaintance of the railway and the pointers, who was ushered in by Lady Horsingham's pompous butler under the style and title of Mr. Haycock. He appeared to be a great friend of the family; and, much to his own discomfiture, was immediately laid violent hands on by my aunt and cousin—the former not thinking it necessary to present him to me, till he offered me his arm to take me in to dinner, when her face of reproval, on his stammering out he "had met Miss Coventry before," was worth anything, expressive as it was of shocked propriety and puzzled astonishment.

When you have a secret only known to your two selves, even with a shy man, it is wonderful how it brings him on. Before the soup was off the table, Squire Haycock and I had become wonderfully good friends. He had hoped my ankle did not pain me, and I had trusted *his* arms did not ache; he had even gone the length of vowing that he would have shot his clumsy retriever for being the cause of the accident, only he let her off because "if it hadn't been for the dog"— and here, seeing cousin Amelia's eyes fixed upon us, my companion stopped dead short, and concealed his blushes in a glass of champagne. Taking courage from that well-iced stimulant, he reverted to our railway journey in company.

"I knew you again this morning, Miss Coventry, I assure you, a long way off; in fact, I was going the other way—only, seeing you walking in that lonely part of the down, I feared you might be frightened" (he was getting bright scarlet again), "and I determined to watch you at a little distance, and be ready to assist you if you were alarmed by tramps, or sheep-dogs, or"—

I thought he was getting on too fast, so I stopped him at once by replying—

"I am well able to take care of myself, Mr. Haycock, I assure you, and I like best walking *quite* alone;" after which I turned my shoulder a little towards him, and completely discomfited him for the rest of dinner. One great advantage of diffidence in a man is, that one can so easily reduce him to the lowest depths of despondency; but then, on the other hand, he is apt to think one means to be more cruel than one does, and one is obliged to be kind in proportion to previous coldness, or the stupid creature breaks away altogether. When the ladies got up to leave the dining-room, I dropped my handkerchief well under the table, and when it was returned to me by the squire, I gave him such a look of gratitude as I knew would bring him back to me in the evening. Nobody hates flirting so much as myself, but what is one to do shut up in a country-house, with no earthly thing to occupy or amuse one?

Tea and coffee served but little to produce cordiality amongst the female portion of the guests

after their flight to the drawing-room. Lady Horsingham and Lady Banneret talked apart on a sofa; they were deep in the merits of their respective preachers and the failings of their respective maids. Mrs. Marmaduke and Mrs. Marygold, having had a book-club feud, did not speak to each other, but communicated through the medium of Miss Finch, whose deafness rendered this a somewhat unsatisfactory process. Aunt Deborah went to sleep, as usual; and I tried the two Miss Bannerets consecutively, but ascertained that neither would open her lips, at least in the presence of mamma. At last I found a vacant place by the side of Mrs. Plumridge, and discovered immediately, with the peculiar freemasonry which I believe men do not possess, that she was one of my sort. She liked walking, riding, driving, dancing—all that I liked, in short; and she hated scandal-gossiping, sensible women, morning visits, and worsted-work, for all of which I confess to an unqualified aversion. We were getting fast friends when the gentlemen came in from their wine, honest Sir Brian's voice sounding long before he entered the room, and the worthy gentleman himself rolling in with an unsteady step—partly from incipient gout, and partly, I fancy, from a good deal of port wine. He took a vacant seat by me almost immediately, chiefly, I think, because it *was* the nearest seat; and avowing openly his great regard and admiration for my neighbour, Mrs. Plumridge, proceeded to make himself agree-

able to both of us in his own way,—though I am concerned to state that he trod heavily on my sprained foot, and spilt the greater part of a cup of coffee over her satin gown. The squire, whose nerves for the present were strung above blushing pitch, soon joined our little party; and whilst the two Miss Bannerets performed an endless duet on aunt Horsingham's luckless pianoforte, and their brother, choking in his stiff white neckcloth, turned over the leaves, Sir Brian bantered Mr. Haycock gracefully on his abstemiousness after dinner, an effort of self-denial of which no one could accuse *him*, and vowed, with much laughter, that "Haycock must be in love! in love, Miss Coventry —don't you think so? A man that always used to take his two bottles as regularly as myself—I am a foe to excess, ladies, but Haycock's an anchorite, d—— me—a monk! Haycock, monks mustn't marry, you know.—Wouldn't he look well with his feet shaved, Miss Coventry, and his head bare, and a rope round his neck?" Sir Brian was getting confused, and had slightly transposed the clerical costume to which he alluded; but was quite satisfied that his little badinage was witty and amusing in the extreme; indeed, Mrs. Plumridge and I couldn't help laughing; but poor Squire Haycock's embarrassment was so intense, that he ordered his carriage immediately, and took leave, venturing, however, at the very last, to shake me by the hand, and braving once again the banter of the inebriated baronet.

"Stole away," said Sir Brian: "a shy man, Miss Coventry—a shy, diffident man, my friend Haycock, but true as steel—not a better landlord in the county—excellent neighbour—useful magistrate — good house — beautiful garden — lots of poultry, and a glass beehive—wants nothing but a wife! Order the carriage, my lady. Mrs. Plumridge, you must come and see us at Slopperly, and don't forget to bring Plumridge. Miss Coventry, you're a charming young lady, mind you come too."

So jolly Sir Brian wished us both a most affectionate good-night, and shaking aunt Horsingham violently by both hands, packed himself into his carriage in a state of high good-humour and confusion. I have since heard that on his arrival at Slopperly he stoutly refused to get out, declaring that he preferred to sit in the carriage whilst they changed horses, and avowing, much to his old butler's astonishment, his resolution to go "at least one more stage that night."

CHAPTER XI

MY DIARY

I MUST despair of being able, in simple narrative, to convey the remotest idea of the dulness of Dangerfield Hall; but as during my residence there I beguiled the weary hours by keeping a diary (bound in blue velvet, with brass clasps, and a Bramah lock), I have it in my power, by transcribing a few of its pages, to present to my readers my own impressions of life in that well-regulated establishment. I put things down just as they happened, with my own reflections, more or less philosophical, on the events of each day. My literary labours were invariably carried on after the family had retired for the night; and I may observe that a loose white dressing-gown, trimmed with Mechlin lace and pink ribbons, one's hair of course being taken down, is a costume extremely well adapted to the efforts of composition. I take a day from the diary at random :—

Thursday.—Up at half-past seven: peeped in the glass the instant I was out of bed, and wondered how cousin Amelia looks when she wakes; yellowish, I should think, and by no means captivating,

particularly if she wears a nightcap. I don't care how ugly a woman is, she has no right to look anything but *fresh* in the morning, and yet how few possess this advantage! Nothing like open air and plenty of exercise; saving one's complexion is undoubtedly the very way to spoil it. Saw Brilliant and White Stockings going to exercise in the park: what coddles they look on these fine autumn mornings, covered with clothing! Felt very keen about hunting; the same feeling always comes on at the fall of the leaf; shouldn't wonder if I could jump a gate, with my present nerves. Should like once, in my life to *plant* a field of horsemen, and show these gentlemen how a woman can ride. Interrupted in my day-dreams by Lady Horsingham's bell, and huddled on my things in a tremendous hurry; forced to wash my hands in cold water, which made the tips of my fingers as red as radishes for the rest of the day. Got down to prayers by half-past eight, and took aunt Deborah her tea and toast from the breakfast-table at nine.

Breakfast dull, and most of the party cross: aunt Horsingham is generally out of humour at breakfast-time, particularly on Sundays. Cousin Amelia suggested my towels were too coarse—"they had rubbed a colour into my cheeks like a dairymaid's." John said I looked like a rose; a tea-rose, he added, as I handed him his cup. Cousin John is getting quite poetical, and decidedly improved since he left London. I wonder whom

he got that letter from that was lying on his plate when he came down? I am *not* curious, but I just glanced at the direction, and I am certain it was in a lady's hand—not that it's any business of mine, only I should think Miss Molasses would hardly have the face to write to him. I wonder whether there *is* anything between John and Miss Molasses. I asked him, half spitefully, the other day, how he could bear to be parted from her now the season was over: and he seemed so pleased at my taking an interest in the thing at all, that I had no patience to go on with my cross-questioning. I don't think she's good enough for John, I must confess, but he is easily imposed on by young ladies—as indeed, for that matter, are the rest of his great thick-headed sex. When breakfast was over, and cousin Amelia went off as usual to practise her music for an hour or two, I thought I might steal away for a visit to my favourites in the stable; indeed, I saw John at the front door, in a hideous wideawake, with a long cigar in his mouth; but I was waylaid by aunt Horsingham, and as these visits to the stable are strictly forbidden, I was obliged to follow her into the drawing-room, and resign myself for the whole morning to that dreadful worsted-work, more especially as it was coming on a drizzling mist, and there was no pretext for my usual walk.

"I am glad to see you getting more sociable, Kate," said Lady Horsingham, in her dry, harsh voice, as I took a seat beside her and opened my work-basket. "It is never advisable for any

young lady to affect singularity, and I have observed, with some concern, that your demeanour on many occasions is very unlike that of the rest of your sex."

I never give in to aunt Horsingham; after all she's not my own aunt, so I answered as pertly as ever I could—

"No; you mean I don't spend the morning in looking in the glass, and talking evil of my neighbours; I don't scream when I see a beetle, or go into convulsions because there's a mouse in the room. I've got two legs, very good legs, aunt Horsingham—shall I show you them?—and I like to use them, and to be out-of-doors amongst the trees and the grass and the daisies, instead of counting stitches for work that nobody wants, or writing letters that nobody reads. I had rather give Brilliant a good bucketing" (aunt Horsingham shuddered—I knew she would, and used the word on purpose) "over an even heath or a line of grass, than go bodkin in a chariot, seven miles an hour, and both windows up. Thank you, aunt Horsingham; you would like to make a fine lady of me — a useless, sickly, lackadaisical being, instead of a healthy, active, light-hearted woman; much obliged to you—I had rather stay as I am."

"Miss Coventry," said my aunt, who was completely posed by my volubility, and apparently shocked beyond the power of expression at my opinions — "Miss Coventry," she repeated, "if these are indeed your sentiments, I must beg, nay,

I must insist, on your keeping them to yourself whilst under *this* roof. (Amelia, my dear" [to my cousin, who was gliding quietly into the room], "Amelia, go back to your music for ten minutes.) I must insist, Miss Coventry, that you do not inoculate my daughter with these pernicious doctrines—this mistaken view of the whole duties and essentials of your sex. Do you think men appreciate a woman who, if she had but a beard, would be exactly like one of themselves? Do you think they like to see their ideal hot and dishevelled, plastered with mud, and draggled with wet? Do you think they wish her to be strong and independent of them, and perhaps their superior at those very sports and exercises on which they plume themselves? Do you think they are to be taken by storm, and, so to speak, bullied into admiration? You're wrong, Kate, you're wrong: and I believe I am equally wrong to talk to you in this strain, inasmuch as the admiration of the other sex ought to be the last thing coveted or thought of by a young person of yours."

"I'm sure, aunt, I don't want the men to admire me," I replied; "but I would not give much for the admiration of one who could be jealous of me for so paltry a cause as my riding better than himself; and as for ideals, I don't know much about such things, but I think a man's ideal may do pretty well what she likes, and he is sure to think everything she does do is perfect. Besides, I don't see why I should bully him into liking me

because I'm fond of the beautiful out-of-doors instead of the fireside. And courageous women, like courageous men, are generally a deal more gentle than the timid ones. I've known ladies, who would not venture into a carriage or a boat, who could wage a war of words bitterer than the veriest trooper would have at his command; and I've heard cousin John say that there is scarcely an instance of a veritable heroine in history, from Joan of Arc downwards, who was not in her private life as sweet, as gentle, and as womanly as she was high-couraged and undaunted when the moment came that summoned her energies to the encounter. Unselfishness is the cause in both cases, you may depend. People that are always so dreadfully afraid something is going to happen to them, think a great deal more of self than anything else; and the same cause which makes them tremble at imaginary danger for their own sakes, will make them forgetful of real sufferings in which they themselves have no share. I had rather be a hoyden, aunt Horsingham, and go on in my own way. I have much more enjoyment; and, upon my word, I don't think I'm one bit a worse member of society than if I was the most delicate fine lady that ever fainted away at the overpowering smell of a rose-leaf, or the merry peal of a noisy child's laugh."

My aunt lifted up her hands and gave in; for the return of cousin Amelia from the music-room effectually prevented further discussion; and we

beguiled the time till luncheon by alternate fits of scandal and work, running through the characters of most of the neighbours within twenty miles, and completely demolishing the reputation of *my* friend, as they called her, lively, sarcastic little Mrs. Plumridge. John was off rabbit-shooting; so of course he did not appear at that meal so essential to ladies; and after cousin Amelia, by way of being delicate, had got through two cutlets, the best part of a chicken, a plateful of rice-pudding, and a large glass of sherry, I ventured to propose to her that if the afternoon held up we should have a walk.

"I'm not equal to much fatigue," said she, with a languid air and a heavy look about her eyes which I attributed to the luncheon; "but if you like, we'll go to the garden and the hothouses, and be back in time for a cup of tea at five o'clock."

"Anything to get out of the house," was my reply; and forthwith I rushed upstairs, two steps at a time, to put on my things, whilst my aunt whispered to her daughter loud enough for me to hear, "She really ought to have been a man, Emmy; did you ever see such a hoyden in your life?"

It was pleasant to get out even into that formal garden. The day was soft and misty, such as one often finds it towards the close of autumn—dark without being chill, and the withered leaves strewed the earth in all the beauty of wholesome natural decay. Autumn makes some people miserable; I

confess it is the time of year that I like best. Spring makes me cross if it's bad weather, and melancholy if it's fine. Summer is very enjoyable, certainly, but it has a luxuriance of splendour that weighs down my spirits; and in those glorious hot, dreamy, hay-making days, I seem unable to identify myself sufficiently with all the beauty around me, and to pine for I don't exactly know what. Winter is charming, when it don't freeze, with its early candle-light and long evenings; but autumn combines everything that to me is most delightful —the joys of reality and the pleasures of anticipation. Cousin Amelia don't think so at all.

"A nasty raw day, Kate," she remarked, as we emerged from the hothouse into the moist, heavy air. "How I hate the country, except whilst the strawberries are ripe. Let's go back to the house, and read with our feet on the fender till tea-time."

"Not yet, Emmy," I pleaded, for I really pined for a good walk; "let's go on the high-road as far as the milestone—it's market-day at Muddlebury, and we shall see the tipsy farmers riding home, and the carriers' carts with their queer-looking loads; besides, think what a colour you'll have for dinner. Come on, there's a dear!"

The last argument was unanswerable; and cousin Amelia putting her best foot foremost, we soon cleared the garden and the approach, and emerged on the high-road three miles from Muddlebury, and well out of the sight of the windows of Dangerfield Hall. As we rose the

hill, on the top of which is perched the well-known milestone, and my cousin began already to complain of fatigue, the sound of hoofs behind us caused us both to stop and look round.

"It's cavalry," said Amelia, who jumps rather rapidly to conclusions, and is no judge of a horse.

"It's a stud," was my reply; "somebody coming to hunt with the Heavytop. Let's stand in this gateway and see them pass."

We took up a position accordingly; and if I felt keen about the commencement of the season previously, how much more so did I become to watch the string of gallant well-bred horses now jogging quietly towards us with all the paraphernalia and accessories of the chase! Two, four, six, and a hack, all clothed and hooded, and packed for travelling. Such a chestnut in the van, with a minute boy on him, who cannot have weighed four stone—strong, flat, sinewy legs (the chestnut's, not the boy's), hocks and thighs clean, full, and muscular as Brilliant's, only twice the size; a long, square tail, and a wicked eye,—how I *should* like to ride that chestnut. Then a brown and two bays, one of the latter scarcely big enough for a hunter, to my fancy, but apparently as thoroughbred as Eclipse; then a grey, who seemed to have a strong objection to being led, and who held back and dragged at his rein in a most provoking manner; and lastly, by the side of a brown hack that I fancied I had seen before, a beautiful black horse, the very impersonation of strength, sym-

metry, courage, speed, and all that a horse should be.

"Ask the groom whose they are," whispered Amelia, as he went by. "I don't quite like to speak to him; he looks an impudent fellow, with those dark whiskers."

I should like to see the whiskers that would frighten *me*; so I stepped boldly out into the road, and accosted him at once.

"Whose horses are those, my man?" I asked, with my most commanding air.

"Captain Lovell's, miss," was the reply. My heart jumped into my mouth, and you might have knocked me down with a feather.

"Captain Lovell's!" exclaimed Amelia; "why, that's your old flirt, Kate. I see it all now"—but I hardly heard her, and when I looked up the horses were a mile off, and we were retracing our steps towards Dangerfield Hall.

What a happy day this has been, and how unpromising was its beginning! And yet I don't know why I should have been so happy. After all, there is nothing extraordinary in Captain Lovell's sending down a stud of horses to hunt with so favourite a pack as the Heavytop hounds. I wish I had summoned courage to ask the man when his master was coming, and where he was going to stay; but I really couldn't do it, no, not if my life had depended on it. All the way home, cousin Amelia laughed, and sneered, and chattered, and once she acknowledged I was "the best-

tempered girl in the world"; but I am sure I have not an idea why I deserve this character: her words fell perfectly unheeded on my ear. I was glad to get to the solitude of my own room, when it was time to dress for dinner, that I might have the luxury, if it was only for five minutes, of thinking undisturbed; but there was aunt Deborah to be attended to; for poor aunt Deborah, I am sorry to say, is by no means well, and Gertrude came in to do my hair; and then the dinner-bell rang, and the wearisome meal, and the long evening dragged on in their accustomed monotony; but *I* did not find it as dull as usual, though I was more rejoiced than ever when the hand-candles came, and we were dismissed to go to bed.

And now they are all fast asleep, and I can sit at my open window, and think, think, think, as much as I like. What a lovely night it is! The mist has cleared off, and the moat is glistening in the moonlight, and the old trees are silvered over and blackened alternately by its beams; the church tower stands out massively against the sky. How dark the old belfry looks on such a night as this, contrasting with the white tombstones in the churchyard, and the slated roof shimmering above the aisle! There is a faint breeze sighing amongst the few remaining leaves, now rising into a pleading whisper, now dying away with a sad unearthly moan. The deer are moving restlessly about the park, now standing out in bold relief on some open space brightened by the moonlight, now flitting like

spectres athwart the shade. Everything breathes of romance and illusion ; and I do believe it is very bad for one to be watching here, dreaming wide awake, instead of snoring healthily in bed. I wonder what he is about at this moment?—perhaps smoking a cigar out of doors, and enjoying this beautiful night. I wonder what he is thinking of? perhaps, after all, he's stewed up in some lamp-lit drawing-room, talking nonsense to Lady Scapegrace and Mrs. Lumley, or playing that odious whist at his club. Well, I suppose I may as well go to bed. One more look into the night, and then —hark! what is it? how beautiful! how charming! distant music from the wood at the low end of the park ; the deer are all listening, and now they troop down towards the noise in scores : how softly it dies away and rises again : 'tis a cornet-à-piston, I think, and though not very skilfully played, it sounds heavenly by moonlight. I never thought that old air of "You'll remember me" half so beautiful before. Who can it be? I have never heard it since I came here. It can't be Captain Lovell's groom ; it's not quite impossible it might be Captain Lovell himself. Ah! if I thought that! Well, it has ceased now. I may as well go to bed. What a happy day this has been, and what dreams I shall have!

CHAPTER XII

THE HEAVYTOP HOUNDS

FRIDAY.—This has been an eventful day. I thought somehow it would be so; at all events, the first day's hunting is always an era to me—so when I came down to breakfast in my riding-habit, and braved the cold glances of my aunt and the sarcasms of my cousin, I was prepared for a certain amount of excitement, although, I confess, I did not bargain for quite so much as I got.

"You'll enjoy yourself to-day, I trust, Miss Coventry," said aunt Horsingham, looking as black as thunder.

"Mind you don't get a fall," observed cousin Amelia, with a sneer; but I cared little for their remarks and remonstrances. White Stockings was at the door, cousin John ready to lift me into my saddle, and I envied no mortal woman on earth, no, not our gracious Queen upon the throne, when I found myself fairly mounted, and jogging gently down the park, in all the delightful anticipation of a good day's sport. I think I would rather have ridden Brilliant of the two, but John suggested that

the country was cramped and sticky, with small fields and blind fences. Now, White Stockings is an animal of great circumspection, and allows no earthly consideration to hurry him. He is, moreover, as strong as a dray-horse, and as handy, so John declares, "as a fiddle." To him, therefore, was entrusted the honour of carrying me on my first appearance with the Heavytop hounds. The meet was at no great distance from Dangerfield Hall, and being the beginning of the season, and a favourite place, there was a considerable muster of the *élite* of the county, and a goodly show of very respectable horses to grace the covert side. As we rode up to the mounted assemblage, I perceived, by the glance of curiosity, not to say admiration, directed at myself and White Stockings, that ladies were unusual visitors in that field, and that the Heavytop gentlemen were not prepared to be cut down, at all events by a woman. Cousin John seems to know them all and to be a universal favourite.

"Who's the lady, John, my boy?" whispered a fat squire, in a purple garment, with a face to match; "good seat on a horse, eh? rides like a bird, I'll warrant her." I did not catch John's answer; but the corpulent sportsman nodded, and smiled, and winked, and wheezed out, "Lucky dog—pretty cousin—double harness."

I don't know what he meant; but that it was something intensely ludicrous, I gather from his nearly choking with laughter at his own concluding

observation, though John blushed and looked rather like a fool.

"Who's that girl on the chestnut?" I again heard asked by a slang-looking man, with red whiskers meeting under his chin; "looks like a larker—I must get introduced to her," added the conceited brute. How I hated him! If he had ventured to speak to me, I really think I could have struck him over the face with my riding-whip.

"I told you it would not be long before we met, Miss Coventry," said a well-known voice beside me; and turning round, I shook hands with Captain Lovell; and I am ashamed to confess, shook all over into the bargain. I am always a little nervous the first day of the season. How well he looked in his red coat and neat appointments, with his graceful seat upon a horse, and so high-bred, amongst all the country squires and jolly yeomen that surrounded us! He had more colour, too, than when in London; and altogether I thought I had never seen him looking so handsome. The chestnut with the wicked eye, showing off his fine shape, now divested of clothing, curveted and bent to his rider's hand as if he thoroughly enjoyed that light restraining touch: the pair looked what the gentlemen call "all over like going," and I am sure one of them thought so too.

"I saw your horses on their way to Muddlebury, yesterday," I at length found courage to say; "are you going to hunt all the season with the Heavytop?"

"How long do you stay at Dangerfield?" was the counter question from Frank; "you see I know the name of the place already; I believe I could find my way now about the park; very picturesque it is, too, by night, Miss Coventry. Do you like music by moonlight?"

"Not if it's played out of tune," I answered, with a laugh and a blush: but just then Squire Haycock, whom I scarcely knew in his hunting costume, rode up to us, and begged as a personal favour to himself that we would accompany him to a particular point, from which he could ensure us a good start if the fox went away—his face becoming scarlet as he expressed a hope "Miss Coventry would not allow her fondness for the chase to lead her into unnecessary danger"; whilst Frank looked at him with a half-amused, half-puzzled expression, that seemed to say, "What a queer creature you are; and what the deuce can that matter to you?"

I wonder why people always want to oblige you when you don't want to *be* obliged; "too civil by half" is much more in the way than "not half civil enough." So we rode on with Squire Haycock, and took up a position at the end of the wood that commanded a view of the whole proceedings, and, as Frank whispered to me, was "the likeliest place in the world if we wanted to head the fox."

The Heavytop hounds are an establishment such as, I am given to understand, is not usually kept in Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, and other so-called "flying counties." I like to gain

all the information I can—cousin John calls this thirst for knowledge female curiosity—and gather from him that the Heavytop consists of twenty-two couples of hunting hounds, and that the whole twenty-two come out three times a week during the season. I don't see why they shouldn't, I am sure; they look very fat, and remind me of the otter hounds poor uncle Horace used to keep when I was a child. He (that's my oracle, cousin John) further adds, that they are remarkably steady—which is more than can be said of their huntsman, who is constantly drunk—and that they consume a vast quantity of flesh; which, far from being a meritorious, appears to me a disgusting tendency. They are capital line-hunters, so says John; a "line-hunter," I imagine, is a hound that keeps snuffing about under the horses' feet, and must be a most useful auxiliary, when, as is often the case, the sportsmen are standing on the identical spot where the fox has crossed. He considers them a very killing pack, not in manners or appearance certainly, but in perseverance and undying determination. Their huntsman is what is called one of the old sort: if this is a correct description, I can only say that "the old sort" must have worn the brownest and shabbiest of boots, the oldest of coats, and the greasiest of caps; must have smelt of brandy on all occasions; and lived in a besotted state of general confusion, vibrating between "delirium audacious" and "delirium tremens." They have, however, a certain

whip, called Will, who appears to me to do all the work, and to keep everything right. When old Tippler drinks himself to death (a casualty which must shortly happen), Will is pretty sure to succeed him — an event which I fancy will greatly add to the efficiency of the Heavytop hounds. To crown all, Frank Lovell dubs the whole thing slow ; but I have remarked, gentlemen make use of this epithet to convey their disapproval of that which they cannot find any positive fault with—just as we ladies call a woman "bad style," when we have nothing else to say in her disparagement.

"Gone away!" exclaims Squire Haycock, lifting his cap high above his red head ; "yonder he goes! Don't you see him, Miss Coventry, now whisking under the gate?"

"Forward, forward!" holloas Frank, giving vent to his excitement in one of those prolonged screams that proclaim how the astonished sportsman has actually seen the fox with his own eyes. The next instant he is through the hand-gate at the end of the ride, and rising in his stirrups, with the wicked chestnut held hard by the head, is speeding away over the adjoining pasture, alongside of the two or three couples of leading hounds that have just emerged from the covert. Ah! we are all forgotten now ; women, children, everything is lost in that first delirious five minutes when the hounds are really away. Frank was gazing at me a minute ago as if his very life was at my disposal,

and now he is speeding away a field ahead of me, and don't care whether I break my neck following him or not. But this is no time for such thoughts as these; the drunken huntsman is sounding his horn in our rear. Will, the whip, cap in hand, is bringing up the body of the pack. Squire Haycock holds the gate open for me to pass; cousin John goes by me like a flash of lightning; White Stockings with a loose rein, submits to be kicked along at any pace I like to ask him; the fence at the end of the field is nothing, I shall go exactly where Frank did; my blood thrills with ecstasy in my veins: moment of moments! I have got a capital start, and we are in for a run.

As I sit here in my arm-chair and dressing-gown, I see the whole panorama of to-day passing once more before my eyes. I see that dark, wet, ploughed field, with the white hounds slipping noiselessly over its furrowed surface. I can almost perceive the fresh wholesome smell of the newly-turned earth. I see the ragged, overgrown, straggling fence at the far end, glistening with morning dew, and green with formidable briers. I see Frank Lovell's chestnut rising at the weakest place, the rider sitting well back, his spurs and stirrup-irons shining in the sun; I see Squire Haycock's square scarlet back, as he diverges to a well-known corner for some friendly egress; I hear cousin John's voice shouting, "Give him his head, Kate!" As White Stockings and I rapidly approach the leap, my

horse relapses of his own accord into a trot, points his small ears, crashes into the very middle of the fence, and just as I give myself up for lost, makes a second bound that settles me once more in the saddle, and lands gallantly in the adjoining field, Frank looking back over his shoulder in evident anxiety and admiration, whilst John's cheery voice, with its "Bravo, Kate!" rings in my delighted ears. We three are now nearest the hounds, a long strip of rushy meadow-land before us, the pack streaming along the side of a high thick hedge that bounds it on our left; the south wind fans my face and lifts my hair, as I slacken my horse's rein and urge him to his speed. I am alongside of Frank. I could ride anywhere now, or do anything. I pass him with a smile and a jest. I am the foremost with the chase. What is ten years of common life, one's feet upon the fender, compared to five such golden minutes as these? The hounds stop suddenly, and after scattering and spreading themselves into the form of an open fan, look up into my face with an air of mute bewilderment. The huntsmen and the field come up, the gentlemen in a high state of delight and confusion; but Mr. Tippler in the worst of humours, and muttering as he trots off to a corner of the meadow with the pack about his horse's heels—

"Rode 'em slap off the scent—*drove* 'em to a check—wish she was at home and a-bed and asleep, and be d——d to her!"

A grim old lady who has but one eye, and

answers to the name of Jezebel, has threaded the fence, and proclaims in anything but a sweet voice to her comrades, that she has discovered the line of our fox. They join her in an instant, down go their heads in concert, and away we all speed again, through an open gate, across a wide common, into a strip of plantation, over a stile and foot-board that leads out of it, and I find myself once more following Captain Lovell with cousin John alongside of me, and all the rest far, far behind. This is indeed glorious. I should like it to go on till dinner-time. How I hope we shan't kill the fox.

"Take hold of his head, Kate," says my cousin, whose horse has just blundered on to his nose, through a gap; "even White Stockings won't last for ever, and this is going to be something out of the common."

"Forward!" is my reply, as I point with my whip towards the lessening pack, now a whole field ahead of us; "Forward!" If we hadn't been going such a pace I could have sung for joy.

There is a line of pollarded willow-trees down in that hollow, and the hounds have already left these behind them; they are rising the opposite ground. Again Frank Lovell looks anxiously back at me, but makes no sign.

"We *must* have it, Kate!" says John; "there's your best place, under the tree; send him at it as hard as he can lay legs to the ground."

I ply my whip and loosen my reins in vain.

White Stockings stops dead short, and lowers his nose to the water, as if he wanted to drink; all of a sudden the stream is behind me, and with a flounder and a struggle we are safe over the brook. Not so cousin John; I see him on his legs on the bank, with his horse's head lying helplessly between his feet, the rest of that valuable animal being completely submerged.

"Go along, Kate!" he shouts encouragingly, and again I speed after Frank Lovell, who is by this time nearly a quarter of a mile ahead of me, and at least that distance behind the hounds. White Stockings is going very pleasantly, but the ground is now entirely on the rise, and he indulges occasionally in a trot without any hint on my part; the fences fortunately get weaker and weaker; the fields are covered with stones, and are light good galloping enough, but the rise gets steeper every yard; round hills are closing in about us; we are now on the Downs, and the pack is still fleeting ahead, like a body of hounds in a dream, every moment increasing their distance from us, and making them more and more indistinct. Frank Lovell disappears over the brow of that hill, and I urge White Stockings to overtake my only companion. He don't seem to go much faster, for all that. I strike him once or twice with my light riding-whip; I shake my reins, and he comes back into a trot; I rise in my stirrup and rouse his energies in every way I can think of. I am afraid he must be ill; the trot degenerates

into a jog, a walk; he carries his head farther out from him than is his wont, and treats curb and snaffle with a like disregard and callousness of mouth. Now he stops altogether, and catching a side view of his head, his eye appears to me more prominent than usual, and the whole animal seems changed, till I can hardly fancy it is my own horse. I get a little frightened now, and look round for assistance. I am quite alone. Hounds, horsemen, all have disappeared; the wide, dreary, solitary Downs stretch around me, and I begin to have misgivings as to how I am to get back to Dangerfield Hall. Cousin John has explained it all to me since.

"Nothing could be simpler, Kate," said he, this evening, when I handed him his tea; "you stopped your horse. If ladies *will* go in front with a loose rein for five and forty minutes, 'riding jealous' of such a first-rate performer as Frank Lovell, it is not an unlikely thing to happen. If you could have lasted ten minutes longer, you would have seen them kill their fox. Frank was the only one there, but he assures me he could not have gone another hundred yards. Never mind, Kate, better luck next time!"

Well, to return to my day. After a while, White Stockings began to recover himself: I'm sure I didn't know what to do for him. I got off, and loosened his girths as well as I could, and turned his head to the wind, and wiped his poor nose with my pocket-handkerchief. I hadn't any

eau-de-Cologne, and if I had, it might not have done him much good. At last he got better, and I got on again (all my life I've been used to mounting and dismounting without assistance). Thinking downhill must be the way home, downhill I turned him, and proceeded slowly on, now running over in my own mind the glorious hour I have just spent, now wondering whether I should be lost and have to sleep amongst the Downs, and anon coming back to the old subject, and resolving that hunting was the only thing to live for, and that for the future I would devote my whole time and energies to that pursuit. At last I got into a steep chalky lane, and at a turn a little farther on espied, to my great relief, a red-coated back jogging leisurely home. White Stockings pricked his ears and mended his pace, so I soon overtook the returning sportsman, who proved to be no other than Squire Haycock, thrown out like the rest of the Heavytop gentlemen, and only too happy to take care of me, and show me the shortest way (eleven miles as the crow flies) back to Dangerfield Hall.

We jogged on amicably enough, the squire complimenting me much on my prowess, and not half so shy as usual — very often the case with a diffident man when on horseback. We were forced to go very slow, both our horses being pretty well tired; and to make matters better, we were caught in a tremendous hailstorm about two miles from home, just as it was getting dark, and

close to the spot where our respective roads diverged. I could not possibly miss mine, as it was perfectly straight. Ah! that hailstorm has a deal to answer for. We were forced to turn through a hand-gate, and take shelter in a friendly wood. What a ridiculous position, pitch dark, pelting with rain, an elderly gentleman and a young lady on horseback under a fir-tree. The squire had been getting more incoherent for some time; I couldn't think what he was driving at.

"You like our country, Miss Coventry? fine climate, excellent soil, nice and dry for ladies."

I willingly subscribed to all these advantages.

"Good neighbourhood," added the squire; "capital hunting, charming rides, wonderful scenery for sketching. Do you think you could live in this part of the world?"

I thought I could if I was to try.

"You expressed your approbation of my house, Miss Coventry," the squire proceeded, with his hand on my horse's neck; "do you think—I mean—should you consider—or rather I should say, is there any alteration you would suggest—anything in my power,—if you would condescend to ride over any afternoon; may I consider you will so far favour me?"

I said "I should be delighted, but that it had left off raining, and it was time for us to get home."

"One word, Miss Coventry," pleaded the squire, with a shaking voice; "have I your

permission to call upon Lady Horsingham to-morrow?"

I said I thought my aunt would be at home, and expressed my conviction that she would be delighted to see him, and I wished him good-bye.

"Good-bye, Miss Coventry, *good*-bye," said the squire, shaking hands with a squeeze that crushed my favourite ring into my prettiest finger; "you have made me *the happiest of men*—good-bye!"

I saw it all in an instant, just as I see it now. The squire means to propose for me to-morrow, and he thinks I have accepted him. What *shall* I do? *Mrs. Haycock*—Kate Haycock—Catherine Haycock! No, I can't make it look well, write it how I will; and then to vow never to think of anyone else; I suppose I mightn't even *speak* to Frank. Never, no, never; but what a scrape I have got into! and how I wish to-morrow was over!

CHAPTER XIII

"NO! I COULDN'T"

MY diary continued—

Saturday.—Well, it is over at last; and upon my word, I begin to think I am capable of anything after all I have got through to-day since breakfast. Scarcely had I finished the slice of toast and single cup of tea that constitute my morning meal, before I heard the tramp of a horse on the ground in front of the house, followed by the ominous sound of the door-bell. I have remarked that, in all country families, a ring at the door-bell brings everybody's heart into everybody's mouth. Aunt Horsingham, brooding over the teapot as usual, had been in her worst of humours ever since she came down, and tried to look as if no bell that ever was cast had power to move her grim resolve.

"A message by electric telegraph," exclaimed cousin Amelia, who is always anticipating some catastrophe; "no visitor would ever call at such a time."

"Unless he came to propose for one of us," suggested John, who was carving a ham at the side-table.

"Someone on business for me, probably," remarked aunt Horsingham, drawing herself up and looking more stately than usual.

"Mr. Haycock!" announced the butler, throwing open the door with a flourish; and while all our untimely visitor's preparations, such as wiping his shoes, arranging his dress, etc., were distinctly audible outside, we looked at each other in mute astonishment, and I own I *did* feel the guilty one amongst the party.

The squire made his entrance in a state of intense trepidation; having been forcibly deprived of his white hat in the hall, he had nothing but natural means to resort to for concealment of his confusion. Had it not been for an enormous silk handkerchief (white spots on a yellow ground) with which he blew his nose and wiped his brow at short and startling intervals, his condition would have been pitiable in the extreme. The squire's dress, too, was of a more florid style than is usual in these days of sad-coloured attire. A bright blue neckcloth, well starched, and of great depth and volume; a buff waistcoat, with massive gilt buttons; a grass-green riding-coat, of peculiar shape, and somewhat scanty material; white cord trousers, York tan gaiters, and enormous double-soled shooting-shoes, pierced and strapped, and clamped and hobnailed, completing a *tout ensemble* that

almost upset my aunt's gravity, and made me, nervous as I felt, stuff my pocket-handkerchief into my mouth, that I might not laugh outright.

"Fine morning, Lady Horsingham," observed the squire, as if he had come all that distance at this early hour on purpose to impart so valuable a piece of information—"fine morning, but cold," he repeated, rubbing his hands together, though the perspiration stood on his brow. "I don't recollect a much finer morning at this time of year," he resumed, addressing cousin John after a pause, during which he had ceremoniously shaken hands with each of us in succession.

"Will you have some breakfast?" asked Lady Horsingham, whose cold and formal demeanour contrasted strangely with the nervous excitement of her visitor.

"No, thank you—if you please," answered the squire, in a breath, "I breakfasted before I left home; early hours, Lady Horsingham—I think your ladyship approves of early hours—but I'll ask for a cup of tea, if you please;" so he sat down to a weak cup of lukewarm tea with much assumed gusto and satisfaction.

It was now time for cousin Amelia to turn her battery on the squire, so she presently attacked him about his poultry, and his garden, and his farm; the honest gentleman's absent and inconsequent replies causing my aunt and John to regard him with silent astonishment, as one who was rapidly taking leave of his senses; whilst I, who

knew, or at least guessed, the cause of his extraordinary behaviour, began heartily to wish myself back in Lowndes Street, and to wonder how this absurd scene was going to end.

"Your dahlias must have suffered dreadfully from these early frosts," said cousin Amelia, shaking her ringlets at the poor man in what she fancies her most bewitching style.

"Beautifully," was the bewildered reply, "particularly the short-horns."

"You never sent us over the Alderney calf you promised, Mr. Haycock," pursued the lady, now adroitly changing her ground; "I begin to think you are not to be depended on."

"You do me injustice, Miss Horsingham, indeed you do," broke out the squire in a white heat, and with a deprecating glance at me; "I assure you I sent over a very fine cutting, with a pot and everything, directions for matting it in winter and transplanting after a year; if you never got it, I'll discharge my gardener—I will, upon my word."

"I have got such a Cochin China to show you," persisted his tormentor, determined to renew the charge; "when you've finished breakfast, I'll take you to the poultry-yard, if you like."

"Delighted," replied the squire, looking ruefully around him, as if he meditated instant flight; "delighted, I'm sure; but they haven't flowered well this year. I'll teach you how to bud them, if you like; but you're aware, Miss Horsingham, that they've no smell."

John could stand it no longer, and was forced to bolt out of the room. My aunt, too, rose from the table with something approaching a smile; and the squire, screwing his courage to the sticking-place, was following her into the drawing-room, evidently for a private interview, when cousin Amelia, who seemed to have made up her mind to take bodily possession of him, hurried the visitor off to the billiard-room, there to engage in a match which would probably last till luncheon-time. I never saw anything so hopeless as the expression of the victim's countenance, whilst suffering himself to be thus led into captivity. He did summon courage to entreat "Miss Coventry to come and mark" — a favour which, notwithstanding my cousin's black looks, I really had not the heart to refuse him.

Game after game they played, the gentleman apparently abandoning himself to his fate. Sprawling over the table, making the most ridiculous blunders in counting, missing the most palpable of cannons, and failing to effect the easiest of hazards, the lady brandishing her mace in the most becoming attitudes, drooping her long hair over the cushions, and displaying the whiteness of her hand and slender symmetry of her fingers, as she requested her astonished adversary to teach her how to make a bridge, or pocket the red, or screw it off the white, and lisped out "how hard it was to be disappointed by that provoking kiss!" The squire made one or two futile attempts to engage me in a

game, but cousin Amelia was determined to have him all to herself; and as it was getting near the time at which I take aunt Deborah her broth—for poor aunt Deborah, I am sorry to say, is very ill in bed—I made my escape, and as I ran upstairs, heard the billiard-room bell ring, and squire Haycock summon up courage to "know if Lady Horsingham was at leisure, as he wished to see her for five minutes alone in the drawing-room."

People may say what they like about superstition, and credulity, and old women's tales, but I *have* faith in presentiments. Didn't I get up from my work and walk to the window at least a dozen times, to watch for cousin John coming home, that wet day two years ago, when he broke his leg with the harriers, and yet he had only gone out for a morning's canter on the best horse he ever had in his life? Didn't I feel for eight-and-forty hours as if something too delightful was going to happen to me the week that Brilliant was bought and sent home, looking like an angel in a horse's skin? That reminds me I never go to see him now; I hope I am not inconstant to my old friends. And what was it but a presentiment that made my heart beat and my knees knock together when I entered my own room to-day before luncheon, and saw a brown paper parcel on the table, addressed, evidently by the shop people, to "Miss Coventry, Dangerfield Hall"? How my fingers trembled as I untied the thread and unfolded the paper; after all, it was nothing but a packet of worsteds! To

be sure, I hadn't ordered any worsteds, but there might possibly be a note to explain; so I shook every skein carefully, and turned the covering inside out, that the document, if there should be one, might not escape my vigilance. How could my presentiments deceive me? Of course there *was* a note — after all, where was the harm? Captain Lovell had most politely sent me all these worsteds for a cushion I had once talked about working, and very naturally had enclosed a note to say so; and nothing to my mind could be kinder or more welcome than the contents. I am not going to say what they are, of course; though for that matter I easily could, since I have got the note by me at this moment, and have read it over to-day, besides, more than once. After all, there is nothing like a letter. Who does not remember the first letter received in one's childish days, written in a fair round text for childish eyes, or, perhaps, even *printed* by the kind and painstaking correspondent for the little dunce of a recipient? Who has not slept with such a letter carefully hoarded away under the pillow, that morning's first light might give positive assurance of the actual existence of our treasure? Nor is the little urchin the only glad supporter of our admirable postal institutions. Manly eyes moisten with tears of joy over those faint delicate lines traced by her hand whose gentle influence has found the one soft place. Woman hides away in her bosom, close to her loving heart, the precious scrap which assures her

visibly, tangibly, unerringly, that he is hers, and hers alone. Words may deceive, scenes of bliss pass away like a dream. Though ever present to the mind, it requires an effort to disentangle the realities of memory from the illusions of imagination; but a letter is proof positive; there it is in black and white. You may read it again and again; you may kiss it as often as you please; you may prize it, and study it, and pore over it, and find a new meaning in every fresh perusal, a hidden interpretation for every magic word; nothing can unsay it, nothing can deprive you of it—only don't forget to lock it up carefully, and mind you don't go leaving about your keys.

I had hardly read my note over a second time, before cousin Amelia bounced into the room without knocking. I should have locked the door had I known she was coming; as it was, I had only time to pop the note into my dress (the seal made a great scratch just below my neck) before she was upon me, and throwing herself into my arms with a most unusual excess of affection, exclaimed—

"Give me joy, Kate—give me joy—he's gone to mamma—he's in the drawing-room with her now—Oh, Kate! what shall I do?"

"My dear Amelia," I exclaimed, as the delightful thought flashed across me, that, after all, the squire's visit might have been for my cousin, though I must say I wondered at his taste, "am I to congratulate you on being Mrs. Haycock? I do,

indeed, from my heart. I am sure he is an excellent, amiable man, and will make you a capital husband."

"That he will!" exclaimed cousin Amelia; "and such a nice place and gardens, and a very good fortune, too. Upon my word, Kate, I begin to think I'm a lucky girl, though to be sure, with my advantages, I might expect to make a good match. He's not so old, Kate, after all; at least, not so old as he looks; and he's very good-tempered, I know, because his servants say so. I shall alter that tumble-down house of his, and new furnish the drawing-room. Of course he'll take me to London for two or three months every year in the season. I wonder if he knows about Mr. Johnson, not that I ever cared for *him*; and, of course, a poor curate, like that, one couldn't think of it. Do you know, Kate, I thought his manner was very odd the other day when he dined here; though he sat next you, he kept looking at me, and I remarked once that he coloured up, oh! so red; poor fellow, I see it all now. Kate, you shall be one of my bridesmaids—perhaps it will be your turn to be a bride some of these days — who knows!"

Just then Gertrude tapped at the door.

"Miss Coventry, if you please, her ladyship wishes to see you in the drawing-room."

My cousin's face fell several inches.

"Some mistake, Gertrude," she exclaimed. "It's me, isn't it, that mamma wants?"

"Her ladyship bid me tell Miss Kate she wished to see her *immediately*," was my maid's reply; so

I tripped downstairs with a beating heart, and crossed the hall just in time to see Squire Haycock riding leisurely away from the house (though it was bitter cold, and a hard frost, the first of the season), and looking up at the window, doubtless in hopes of an encouraging wave from the white handkerchief of his *fiancée* presumptive.

Short as was the interval between my own door and that of the drawing-room, I had time to run over in my mind the whole advantages and disadvantages of the flattering proposal which I was now convinced had been made on my behalf. If I became Mrs. Haycock (and I saw clearly that I had not mistaken the squire's meaning on our return from hunting), I should be at the head of a handsome establishment, should have a good-tempered, easy-going, pleasant husband, who would let me do just what I liked, and hunt to my heart's content; should live in the country, and look after the poor, and feed hens and chickens, and sink down comfortably into a contented old age. I need not separate from aunt Deborah, who would never be able to do without me; and I might, I am sure, turn the squire with the greatest ease round my little finger: but then there certainly were great objections. I could have got over the colour of his hair, though a red head opposite me every morning would undoubtedly be a trial; but the freckles! No, I do not think I could do my duty as a wife by a man so dreadfully freckled. I'm certain I couldn't love him; and if I didn't love

him I oughtn't to marry him: and I thought of the sad, sad tale of Lucy, Lady Horsingham, whose ghost was now in the nightly habit of haunting Dangerfield Hall; the struggles that poor thing must have gone through, the leaden hours of dull, torpid misery, the agonising moments of acute remorse, the perpetual spirit-wearing conflict between duty and inclination, much to the discomfiture of the former; and the haunting face of cousin Edward continually rising on that heated imagination, pleading, reproaching, suing, till she loved him if possible more madly in his absence than when he was by her side. I, too, was beginning to have a cousin Edward of my own; Frank Lovell's image was far too often present in my mind. I did not choose to confess to myself how much I liked him; but the more I reflected on Mr. Haycock's proposal, the more I felt how impossible it would be never to *think* of Frank any more.

"No!" I said inwardly, with my hand on the drawing-room door, "I will not give him up. I have his note even now in my bosom; he cares for me, at anyrate. I am happier to-day than I have been for months, and I will not go and destroy it all with my own hand." I opened the door, and found myself in the formidable presence of aunt Horsingham. Her ladyship looked colder and more reserved, if possible, than ever. She motioned me stiffly to take a chair, and plunged at once into the subject in her dry, measured tones.

"Before I congratulate you, Kate," she began, "on such an unlooked-for piece of good fortune as has just come to my knowledge, I am bound to confess, much to my astonishment"—

"Thank you, aunt," I put in; "that's complimentary, at anyrate."

"I should wish to say a few words," proceeded my aunt, without heeding the interruption, "on the duties which will now devolve upon you, and the line of conduct which I should advise you to pursue in your new sphere. These hoydenish manners, these ridiculous expeditions, these scampers all over the country, must be renounced forthwith. Unbecoming as they are in a young unmarried female, a much stricter sense of decorum, a vastly different repose and reserve of manner, are absolutely essential in a wife; and it is as a *wife*, Kate, that I am now addressing you."

"A wife, aunt!" I exclaimed; "whose, I should like to know?"

"This is an ill-chosen time for jesting, Kate," said my aunt, with a frown; "I cannot congratulate you on your good taste in turning so important a subject into ridicule. Mr. Haycock has proposed to you; you have accepted him. Whilst poor Deborah is so ill, I am your natural guardian, and he has with great propriety requested my consent; although, in the agitation very natural to a man so circumstanced," added my aunt, smothering a smile, "it was with some difficulty that I made out exactly what he meant."

"He *never* proposed to me, I *never* accepted him," I broke in, breathless with agitation; "I never will be his wife, aunt—you had no right to tell him so. Write to him immediately—send a man off on horseback to overtake him—I'll put my bonnet on this instant, and walk every mile of the way myself. He's a true-hearted gentleman, and I won't have him made a fool of."

I walked up and down the room—I looked aunt Horsingham full in the face; she was quite cowed by my vehemence. I felt I was mistress now, while the excitement lasted, and she gave in; she even wrote a note to the squire at my dictation; she despatched it by a special messenger; she did everything I told her, and never so much as ventured on remonstrance or reproach; but she will never forgive me to her dying hour. There is no victory so complete as that which one obtains over a person who is always accustomed to meet with fear and obedience. Aunt Horsingham rules her household with a rod of iron; nobody ever ventures to disagree with her, or so much as to hint an opinion contrary to those which she is known to hold. Such a person is so astonished at resistance as to be incapable of quelling it; the very hardihood of the rebellion ensures its success. When I walked out of the drawing-room to-day, I felt that for once I had obtained the victory in a contest with my aunt; that in future I should no longer be the "wild, troublesome Kate," the "black sheep" of the family, the scapegoat on whom were

laid the faults and misdemeanours of all—but the master-spirit, the bold, resolute woman, whose value others were able to appreciate, and who was ready and willing to assert her own independence. In the meantime, poor aunt Deborah had to be informed of what had taken place, and cousin Amelia to be undeceived in her groundless expectations. That the latter would never forgive me, I was well enough acquainted with my own sex to be assured; but the task required to be done, notwithstanding. Flushed with my triumph, with heightened colour and flashing eyes, I stalked off towards my chamber, and met cousin John in the hall.

"Good Heavens! Kate, what is the matter? What has happened?" exclaimed John, in obvious perturbation.

"A piece of news!" was my reply; "a conquest, John! What do you think? Mr. Haycock has just been here, and proposed for me!"

He flushed up all over his face and temples, and then turned deadly pale; even his lips were quite white and wide apart; how they quivered as he tried to speak unconcernedly! And after all he got out nothing but, "Well, Kate?"

"And I have refused him, John," I said quietly, but in a tone that showed him there was no mistake about it.

"God bless you, Kate!" was all he replied, and turned away muttering something about wet things and his dressing-room; but he was going to the

wrong door, and had to turn back, though he took care not to let me see his face again.

I can't make John out. At dinner he was just as if nothing had happened; but at all events I'm glad I've refused Mr. Haycock; so I shall read Frank's note over once more, and then go to bed.

CHAPTER XIV

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

I NEED quote no more from my diary, as the next few days offered no incident worthy of recording to break the monotony of our life at Dangerfield Hall. Drearier than ever it was, and more especially to me; for I felt that, although undeclared, there was war to the knife between myself, my aunt, and cousin. The latter scarcely spoke to me at all; and my aunt, whose defeat was rankling bitterly in her heart, merely took such sullen notice of me as was absolutely necessitated by the laws of hospitality and the usages of society. Poor aunt Deborah required to be kept very quiet, and free from all worries and annoyances. "The more she slept," the doctor said, "the sooner she would get well enough to move to London for further advice;" so I had not even her to talk to—there was no hunting—the frost got harder and harder — that obstinate weather-cock over the stables kept veering from north to north-east—the grooms went to exercise wrapped up in greatcoats and shawl handkerchiefs, and stayed out as short a time as was compatible with the mildest stable

discipline: there would be no change of the moon for a week, and it was obvious that I should have but little use for Brilliant and White Stockings before our return to town.

Oh! the hopelessness of a real bitter black frost coming on early in the season, especially when you are not at your own home, and your time is limited; to get up morning after morning with the faint hope that the change may have come at last; to see the dry slates, and the clear horizon, and the iron-bound earth, and to ascertain in your own proper person that the water gets colder and colder every day. You puzzle over the almanack till your eyes ache, and study the thermometer till you get a crick in your neck. You watch the smoke from every farm-house and cottage within your ken, and still, after curling high up into the pure, rarefied atmosphere, it floats hopelessly away to the southward, and corroborates the odious dog-vane that you fondly imagined might have got stuck in its northerly direction. You walk out and ask every labourer you meet, whether he does not think we are going to have a change. The man looks up from his work, wonders at your solicitude, opines "the gentry folks have queer ways," but answers honestly enough, according to his convictions, in the negative—perhaps giving some local reasons for his opinion, which, if an old man, he will tell you he has never known to fail. Lastly, you quarrel with every one of your non-hunting friends, whose unfeeling observations on "fine seasonable

weather," and "healthy bracing frosts," you feel to be brutal in the extreme.

How I hated the frost at Dangerfield! My only chance of meeting with Frank Lovell was out hunting. I had written him an answer to his note (I have often heard aunt Horsingham say, that nothing is so inexcusable as not to answer a letter), and I had no possible means of delivering it. I could not put it in the bag, for my aunt keeps the key. I did not like to entrust it to any of the servants, and my own maid is the last person in whose power I should choose to place myself. I did once think of asking cousin John to give it to Frank, and throwing myself on kind, good John's generosity, and confessing everything to him, and asking for his advice; but somehow I could not bring myself to it: if he had been my brother, nothing would have been easier: but John is only a cousin, and one or two little things of late had made me suspect that he liked me even better than cousins generally do; so altogether I thought I would leave it alone—besides, John was going off to shoot pheasants in Wales. The third morning of the frost he came down to breakfast in a suit of wondrous apparel, that I knew meant a move in some direction, and I attacked him accordingly.

"Is that killing get-up entirely for our benefit, John?" I asked; "or are you bound on some expedition that requires more fascinations than common?"

John coloured—he has taken to blushing lately

—"I'm going down to Wales for a few days' shooting, Kate," was the reply. "I shall come back again when the frost breaks up, if Lady Horsingham will be good enough to receive me."

Aunt Horsingham is always very civil to John, and so is cousin Amelia. People generally are to young bachelors. I wonder why men ever marry, they are so much more in request without wives and children.

"Always happy to see *you*," said aunt Horsingham, with an emphasis on the pronoun. "By the way, what is your address in Wales, that I may forward your letters?"

John looked rather guilty as he handed an envelope to my aunt, and begged her to copy it exactly.

"I can't pronounce the name of my friend Lloyd's place," he said, "but you'll find it written there in seven consonants and one vowel."

"Lloyd!" said I, "Lloyd! Wasn't there a pretty Miss Lloyd you used to dance with last season in London? John! John!—I've found you out at last; now I can account for the splendour of your attire—now I can see why you post off to Wales in such a hurry, leaving your horses, and your hunting, and your cousin, sir, for the *beaux yeux* of Miss Fanny—isn't that her name? Well, John, I give you joy; she is a pretty girl, even in London, and aunt Deborah says she's a fortune."

John looked so distressed, I didn't like to pursue the subject. I couldn't think what had

come over him—he never spoke another word to me till he jumped into his dogcart to be off, and then he only muttered "Good-bye, Kate," in a hoarse whisper, but he wrung my hand very hard, and I even thought there were tears in his eyes! He is a good fellow, John; I was sorry to think I might have said anything to hurt his feelings.

After he went away, it was drearier than ever. What could I do but think of Frank Lovell, and wonder when I should see him again? Where could he be? Perhaps at the inn at Muddlebury. I could see the smoke of the town from the breakfast-room windows, and used to watch it with a painful interest. Every time a servant came into the room, I thought something impossible was going to happen. If a carriage drove up to the house—if a horse's tramp was heard in the approach—if the door-bell rung, I fancied it must be Captain Lovell coming to call—perhaps to explain everything—possibly to request an interview with my aunt, such as Squire Haycock had undergone, "but," as I said to myself with a beating heart, "to have a very different result." If the dwelling solely on one idea be a species of madness, then was I undoubtedly mad—nothing was so wild and extravagant as to appear impossible to my heated fancy. I was always expecting, and always disappointed.

The fourth morning I got a letter from Mrs. Lumley, which did not add much to my composure or comfort. Why is it ladies have such a knack

of making each other miserable equally by letter as by word of mouth? I give the epistle of Mrs. Lumley *verbatim*, omitting only the dashes and notes of admiration with which it was studded:—

"My dearest dear Kate,—Here we are, settled comfortably at Brighton, much to the benefit of my poor dear husband, whom you have never seen, but who knows you well by name, and having everything, even the weather, all we can wish. The only drawback to me is the loss of your charming society, and the absence of your dear merry face.

"I am leading a highly virtuous and praiseworthy life, and have not done the least bit of mischief since I came here, except making the dean's wife jealous, which I can hardly call a crime, as she is a vulgar little woman with a red nose and a yellow bonnet—the dean is a fat, good-natured man, and calls here nearly every day. His wife abuses me in all societies, and tries to pass me without speaking. You know how I always return good for evil, so I go up and shake hands with her, and ask after her dear children, and patronise her till I make her so angry she don't know which way to look—it's rather good fun in such a slow place as this. My time is fully occupied nursing my old man, who was very ill before we came here, and can only go out in a pony-carriage for an hour or two at a time; so I have brought the ponies down, and drive him myself.

"The only chance the brown mare has of a gallop is in the mornings, though next week I mean to have a day with the harriers; indeed, they have appointed them at a good place on purpose for me. I inspected the regiment of Dragoons quartered here, yesterday morning; they were at exercise on the Downs, and as the Gitana (my brown mare) always behaves well with troops, which my enemies would affirm is more than can be said of her mistress, I am able to report upon their general appearance and efficiency. Such a set of 'gigs,' my dear, I never saw in my life; large under-bred horses, and not a good-looking man amongst them. The officers are, if possible, more hideous than the privates, and they never give balls, or theatricals, or anything, so we need waste no more words upon them.

"I am improving my mind, though, vastly, picking up shells for my little cousins, and perfecting my education besides by learning to swim. I wish you were here—what fun we would have enacting the part of mermaids! though I fear the cold will now put a stop

to my aquatic exploits. The other morning I swam nearly two hundred yards on a stretch ; and the tide having taken me out of my reckoning, I brought up, as the sailors say, opposite the gentlemen's bathing-machines. What could I do? It was as impossible to walk along the beach as to fight back against the current. Presence of mind, Kate, is the salient point of the heroic character ; the door of a machine was open, and I popped in. My dear, there were all his clothes, his hair-brush, his button-hook, his wig, and, would you believe it? an instrument for curling his whiskers! I put everything on except the wig, crowned myself with his broad-brimmed white hat, felt in his pockets, which were full of gold and silver, and, to my credit be it said, only selected one shilling, with which I paid the bathing-man, and walked off undiscovered to my own machine. The fat old she-Triton laughed till she cried. I dressed in my proper costume leisurely enough, and was amused to hear afterwards of the luckless plight in which a stout gentleman had found himself, by the temporary loss of all his apparel, whilst he was disporting in the briny.

"Other adventures I have had none ; and the contrast is, as you may believe, somewhat striking after the last two or three weeks of the London season, always to my mind the pleasantest part of the year. I was sorry you left town when you did ; we had such a number of charming little dinners and expeditions in our own set. Dear Frank Lovell was the life and soul of us all. I never knew him in such spirits—quite like a boy out of school ; and there were few days that we did not meet either at Greenwich or Richmond, or Windsor or Vauxhall ; and of course wherever *he* went, there was Lady Scapegrace. I must say, that although nobody can accuse me of being a prude, the way she goes on with Frank is rather too brazen-faced even for *her* ; taking him everywhere in her carriage ; setting him down at his club after the opera ; walking with him in Kensington Gardens ; his cab always at the door, and her ladyship 'not at home' even to me. To be sure, he is almost as bad, if it is true, as everybody says it is, that he is to marry Miss Molasses.

"Poor Frank! he must get hold of somebody with money, or he will soon be in the Bench. He is rather a friend of yours, my dear, so I ought not to abuse him ; but he is very wild, and though extremely agreeable, I am afraid utterly unprincipled. I do not believe, however, that he cares one snap of the fingers for Lady Scapegrace, or Miss Molasses either, for the matter of that. I meant to have written you a long letter, but my stupid servants have let the dean in, and I hear his cough at this moment on the stairs—

he is sadly out of wind before he reaches the first landing. I think even my poor old man would beat him, at even weights, a hundred yards along the beach. As I shall not get rid of him under an hour, and the post will by that time be gone out, I must wish you good-bye.—Ever my dearest Kate's most affectionate, M. L."

I threw the letter on the floor, and stamped upon it with my feet. And was this the end of all? To have brooded and pined, and made myself miserable and well-nigh broken my heart, day by day, for a man that was to prove so utterly unworthy as this. To have been thrown over for a Lady Scapegrace! or, worse still, to have allowed, even to myself, that I cared for one who was ready and willing to be sold to a Miss Molasses.

"Too degrading!" I thought; "no, I'll never care for him again, the dream is over; what a fool I've been! and yet—why did he send his horses down to Muddlebury? Why did he serenade me that night from the park? Why is he not now with his dear Lady Scapegrace at Scamperly, where, I see by the *Morning Post*, Sir Guy is entertaining a party of fashionables during the frost? No! I will not give him up quite yet."

On reading her letter over again, which I did many times during the day, I found a ray of comfort in my voluble correspondent's own opinion that Frank did not himself care a pin for either of the ladies, to both of whom the world gave him so unhesitatingly. Well, that was something, at anyrate. As for his wildness, and his debts, and his recklessness, and many escapades, I liked him none the worse for these—what woman ever did?

I thought it all over during the whole day ; and by the time that I opened my window for my usual look-out into the night before going to bed, I am afraid I felt more inclined than ever to forgive him all that had gone before, and more determined to find some means of forwarding him the answer I had written to his note, and which I had been so many times on the point of burning during the day.

What a bitter cold night it was !—yet the keen north wind felt pleasant and refreshing on my fevered forehead. There had been a sprinkling of snow, too, since sunset, and the open surface of the park was completely whitened over — how cheerless and desolate it looked! I hadn't the heart to stay very long at the window, it reminded me too much of the pleasant evening one short week ago. I felt weary and desponding and drowsy with uncertainty and unhappiness, so I was in the act of shutting down the window, when I saw a dark figure moving rapidly across the snow in the direction of the house. Not for an instant did I mistake it for a deer, or a gamekeeper, or a poacher, or a housebreaker. From the moment I set eyes on it, something told me it must be Frank Lovell ; and though I shrank back that he might not see me, I watched him with painful anxiety and a beating heart. He seemed to know his way quite well : he came straight to the moat, felt his way cautiously for a step or two, and finding the ice would bear him, crossed at once, and took up a position under my window, not twenty feet from where I was standing.

He must have seen my shadow across the candle-light, for he whispered my name.

"Miss Coventry, Kate! only one word."

What could I do? Poor fellow! he had walked all that distance in the cold and the snow only for one word—and this was the man I had been doubting and misjudging all day. Why, of course, though I know it was very wrong and very improper and all that, of course I spoke to him, and listened to what he had to say, and carried on a long conversation, the effect of which was somewhat ludicrous, in consequence of the distance between the parties, question and answer requiring to be *shouted*, as it were, in a whisper. The night, too, was clouding over, more snow was falling, and it was getting so dark, I could not see Frank, even at the distance of twelve or fourteen feet, and it could not have been much more between my bedroom window and the ground.

"Did you get my note?" said he, with sundry complimentary expressions.

"Here's the answer," was my practical reply, as I dropped my own missive into the darkness.

I know he caught it, because — because — *I heard him kiss it.* At that moment I was aware of a step in the passage, a hand on my door: down went my window in a twinkling, out went my candles—the wick of the second one would keep glimmering like a light far off at sea—and in came aunt Horsingham, clad in flannel attire, with a wondrous head-dress, the like of which I have

never beheld before or since, just as I popped into bed, and buried myself beneath the clothes as if I had been asleep for hours.

"Where can it be, Kate?" said my aunt; "I have been in every room along the passage to find out where the light comes from. I saw it distinctly from my own room, streaming across the moat; there might be thieves in the house," added my aunt, looking valiant even in flannel, "or some of the men-servants carousing, but I have been in every room on the ground-floor myself; and then I thought perhaps you might be sitting up reading."

"Reading, aunt? oh dear no! I assure you I wasn't reading," I answered, every nerve racked with suspense, lest Frank should get impatient, and wonder what had become of me — perhaps throw a snowball up at the window to attract my attention.

"What o'clock is it?" I added, with a feigned yawn; "I think I must have been asleep for hours."

As if to punish me for this gratuitous perversion of the truth, the words were hardly out of my mouth when I heard a loud crack on the ice, and a splash as of the sudden immersion of some daring adventurer; then all was still—the snowflakes fell softly against the window panes. My aunt, shading her candle with her long hand, talked drowsily on, and finally persisted in my coming to sleep with her in her own room, as she said I was "the only person in the house that had the nerves of a hen."

I would have given all I was worth in the world to have one more look out of the open window, though even then it might be too late. I would willingly have walked barefoot in the snow all the way to Muddlebury, only to know he was safe back at the inn. For a moment I thought of confessing everything, and alarming the house, but I had not courage, so I followed my aunt to her room, and lay awake that livelong night in such a state of agony and suspense as I hope I may never have to endure again.

CHAPTER XV

AN EXCITING JOURNEY

IT may easily be believed that I took an early walk next morning before breakfast. No sooner had I made my escape from aunt Horsingham's room, than, in utter defiance of the cold thaw just commencing, I put my bonnet on, and made the best of my way to the moat. Sure enough, large fragments of ice were floating about where the surface had been broken, close to the side farthest from the Hall. There were footprints on the snow though, leading away through the park in the direction of Muddlebury, and I came back to breakfast with a heart lightened of at least half its load. We were to return to London immediately. Aunt Deborah, pale and reduced, but undoubtedly better, was able to appear at breakfast; and Lady Horsingham, now that we were really about to take leave of her, seemed to value our society, and to be sorry to part with us.

"My dear Deborah, I trust you are well wrapped up for this cold raw day," said our hostess, pressing on her departing guest all kinds

of provision for the journey. "I have ordered them to put up a paper of sandwiches, and some sherry, and a few biscuits, and a bottle of peppermint-water."

"And, aunt Deborah," put in cousin Amelia, "here's a comforter I've made you myself, and a box of cayenne lozenges for your throat; and don't forget the stone-jug of hot water for your poor feet; and mind you write directly you arrive—you or Kate," she added, turning to address me almost for the first time since the memorable mistake about Squire Haycock.

Aunt Deborah was completely overpowered by so much kindness.

"You'd better have the carriage all to yourself—you and your maid"—persisted Lady Horsingham. "I'll drive Kate as far as the station in the pony-carriage. Kate, you're not afraid to trust yourself with me in the pony-carriage?"

"Not I, indeed, aunt," was my reply, "nor with anybody else, for that matter. I've pretty good nerves—there are few things that I am afraid of."

"Indeed, Kate, I fear it is so," was my aunt's reply. "I own I should like to see you a little more of a coward."

So it was settled that aunt Deborah and Gertrude being safely packed up in the close carriage, I should accompany Lady Horsingham, who was rather proud of her charioteering skill, and drove stiff and upright, as if she had swallowed

the poker—never looking to the right or left, or allowing her attention to wander for an instant from the ponies she had undertaken to control. Now these said ponies had been doing nothing during the frost, except consuming their three feeds a day with vigorous appetite, and a considerable accession of high spirits. Consequently, they were, what is termed in stable language, very much above themselves—a state of self-exaltation which they demonstrated by sundry unbecoming squeaks and gambols as soon as they found themselves fairly started on their journey. Tiny, the youngest and handsomest, would persist in shying, plunging, and swerving against the pole, much to the demoralisation of his comrade, Mouse, a stiff-built little fellow with a thick neck, who was ordinarily extremely well-behaved, but apt, on occasions like the present, to lower his rebellious little head, and defy all control.

Lady Horsingham was tolerably courageous, but totally destitute of what is termed "hand," a quality as necessary in driving as in riding, particularly with fractious or high-spirited horses. The seat of a pony-carriage, besides, is not a position from which a Jehu has much command over the animals in front of him ; and although, as I have repeatedly said, I am not nervous, I had earned sufficient experience in the ways of the equine race to know that we might easily be placed in a position of some peril, should anything occur to excite the mischievous propensities of either of

the specimens now gambolling before us. More accidents have happened out of pony-carriages than all other descriptions of vehicle put together. It is said, that in the olden and golden days of the road, the usual death of a "long coachman" was to be pitched out of a gig; and doubtless that two-wheeled conveniency, particularly when going at any pace, is capable of arriving at a large proportion of grief. But even a gig, if properly constructed, admits of the driver having a certain amount of control over his horse; he is well above the animal, and can get a good purchase to pull him up from, when the acceleration is becoming dangerous, or there is a tendency to the grosser insubordination of a kicking match. Not so in a pony-carriage: low down upon the ground, even under their very heels, you are completely at the mercy of your team; and the facility of egress in the event of a runaway only tempts you to the fatal expedient of jumping out—another form of expression for certain death. To be sure, if people will but sit still, there is no reason why they should be much alarmed, as an "upset" from so low an elevation need not necessarily produce any very serious results. But they never *will* sit still, at least they won't in nine cases out of ten; and the consequence is, that whilst newspaper columns are filled with horrid accidents and frightful occurrences, based on the fact of the unfortunate sufferer taking an airing in his or her pony-carriage, many an elderly lady and cautious gentleman is not to

be persuaded into entering one of these little conveyances, but prefers the slow and sure travelling of his or her own respectable feet.

Well, Lady Horsingham seemed rather uncomfortable on her driving seat, although far too proud to acknowledge so derogatory a feeling. We had no servant with us ; and when I suggested that we might as well take one of the stablemen to open the gates, my proposal was met with derision and contempt.

" I should have thought such a masculine lady as yourself, Kate, would have been above requiring any assistance. I am always in the habit of driving these ponies quite by myself ; but of course, if you're afraid, I'll have a groom to go with us immediately."

Afraid, indeed! I scouted the idea ; my blood was up, and I almost hoped something would happen, that I might fling the word in my aunt's teeth, and ask her, " Who's afraid now ? " It came sooner than I bargained for.

The ponies were pulling hard, and had got their mouths so thoroughly set against my aunt's iron hand, that she might as well have been driving with a pair of halters for any power she had over them, when a rush of colts in an adjoining paddock on one side of the lane, and a covey of partridges whirring up out of a turnip-field on the other, started them both at the same moment. My aunt gave a slight scream, clutched at her reins with a

jerk; down went the ponies' heads, and we were off, as hard as ever they could lay legs to the ground, along a deep-rutted narrow lane, with innumerable twistings and turnings in front of us, for a certainty, and the off-chance of a waggon and bell team blocking up the whole passage before we could emerge upon the high-road.

"Lay hold, Kate!" vociferated my aunt, pulling for her very life, with the veins on her bare wrists swelling up like whipcord. "Gracious goodness! can't you stop 'em? there's a gravel-pit not half a mile farther on! I'll jump out! I'll jump out!"

My aunt began kicking her feet clear of the sundry wraps and shawls, and the leather apron that kept our knees warm, though I must do her the justice to say that she still tugged hard at the reins. I saw such an expedient would be certain death, and I wound one arm round her waist, and held her forcibly down in her seat, while with the other I endeavoured to assist her in the hopeless task of stopping the runaway ponies. Everything was against us: the ground was slightly on the decline; the thaw had not yet reached the sheltered road we were travelling, and the wheels rung against its frozen surface as they spun round with a velocity that seemed to add to the excitement of our flying steeds. Ever and anon we bounded and bumped over some rut or inequality that was deeper than usual. Twice we were within an inch of the ditch; once, for an awful hundred yards, we were balancing on two wheels; and still we went faster and faster

than ever. The trees and hedges wheeled by us; the gravel road streamed away behind us. I began to get giddy, and to lose my strength. I could hardly hope to hold my aunt in much longer, and now she began to struggle frightfully, for we were nearing the gravel-pit turn! Ahead of us was a comfortable fat farmer, jogging drowsily to market in his gig. I can see his broad well-to-do back, now. What would I have given to be seated, I had almost said enthroned, by his side. What a smash if we had touched him! I pulled frantically at the off-rein, and we just cleared his wheel. He said something, I could not make out what. I was nearly exhausted, and shut my eyes, resigning myself to my fate, but still clinging to my aunt. I think that if ever that austere woman was near fainting, it was on this occasion. I just caught a glimpse of her white stony face and fixed eyes; her terror even gave me a certain confidence. A figure in front of us commenced gesticulating, and shouting, and waving its hat. The ponies slackened their pace, and my courage began to revive.

"Sit still," I exclaimed to my aunt, as I indulged them with a good strong give-and-take pull.

The gravel-pit corner was close at hand, but the figure had seized the refractory little steeds by their heads; and though I shook all over, and felt really frightened now the danger was past, I knew that we were safe, and that we owed our safety to a tall ragged cripple with a crutch, and a bandage over one eye. My aunt jumped out in a twinkling;

"Seized the refractory little steeds by their heads"

and, the instant she touched *terra firma*, put her hand to her side, and began to sob, and gasp, and pant, as ladies will previous to an attack of what the doctors call hysteria. She leant upon the cripple's shoulder, and I observed a strange roguish sparkle in his unbandaged eye. Moreover, I remarked that his hands were white and clean; and his figure, if he hadn't been such a cripple, would have been tall and active.

"What shall I do?" gasped my aunt. "I won't get in; nothing shall induce me to get in again. Kate, give this good man half a crown. What a providential escape! He ought to have a sovereign. Perhaps ten shillings will be enough. How am I to get back? I'll walk all the way rather than get in."

"But, aunt," I suggested, "at anyrate I must get to the station. Aunt Deborah is sure to think something has happened, and she ought not to be frightened till she gets stronger. How far is it to the station? I think I should not mind driving the ponies on."

In the meantime the fat farmer, whom we had passed so rapidly, had arrived at the scene of action, his anxiety not having induced him in the slightest degree to increase the jog-trot pace at which all his ideas seemed to travel. He knew Lady Horsingham quite well, and now sat in his gig, with his hat off, wiping his fat face, and expatiating on the narrow escape her ladyship had made, but without offering the slightest suggestion or assistance whatever.

At this juncture the cripple showed himself a man of energy.

"Your ladyship had best go home with this gentleman," said he, indicating the fat farmer, "if the young lady is not afraid to go on. I can take care of her as far as the railway, if it's not too great a liberty, and bring the ponies back to the Hall afterwards, my lady?" with an interrogative snatch at his ragged hat.

It seemed the best thing to be done under the circumstances. My aunt, after much demurring, and another incipient attack of the hysterics, consented to entrust herself to the fat farmer's guidance, not, however, until she was assured that his horse was both blind and broken-winded. I put Mouse's bridle down on the lower bar instead of the cheek, on which he had previously been driven. My aunt climbed into the gig; I mounted the pony-carriage, the cripple took his seat deferentially by my side, and away we went on our respective journeys, certainly in a mode which we had little anticipated when we left the front-door at Dangerfield Hall.

My preserver sat half in and half out of the carriage, leaning his white well-shaped hand upon the splash-board. The bandaged side of his face was towards me; the ponies went quietly enough; they had enjoyed their gallop, and were, I think, a little blown. I had leisure to take a good survey of my companion. When we had thus travelled for a quarter of a mile in silence, he turned

his face towards me. We looked at each other for about half a minute, and then both burst out laughing.

"You didn't know me, Miss Coventry! not the least in the world," exclaimed the cripple, pulling the bandage off his face, and showing another eye quite as handsome as the one that had previously been uncovered.

"How could you do so, Captain Lovell?" was all I could reply. "Conceive if my aunt had found you out; or even if anyone should recognise you now. What would people think of *me*? But how did you know we were going to London to-day, and how could you tell the ponies would run away?"

"Never mind how I knew your movements, Miss Coventry," was the reply. "Kate! may I call you Kate? it's such a soft, sweet name," he added, now sitting altogether *inside* the carriage, which certainly was a small one for two people. "You don't know how I've watched for you, and waited and prowled about, during the last few days. You don't know how anxious I've been only for one word—even one look. I've spent hours out on the Down just to see the flutter of your white dress as you went through the shrubbery—even at that distance it was something to gaze at you, and know you were there. Last night I crossed the ice under your window."

"You did, indeed," I replied, with a laugh, "and what a ducking you must have got!"

Frank laughed, too, and resumed.

"I was sadly afraid that your aunt might have found out you were holding a parley with the enemy outside the walls. I knew you were to go to London to-day. I thought very likely you might be annoyed, and put under surveillance on my account, and I was resolved to see you, if only for one moment; so I borrowed these ragged garments of a professional beggar, who I believe is a great deal better off in reality than myself, and I determined to watch for your carriage and trust to chance for a word, or even a glance of recognition. She has befriended me more than I could expect. At first, when I saw 'aunt Deborah' alone in the chariot, it flashed across me that perhaps you were to stay *en penitence* at Dangerfield. But I knew Lady Horsingham had a pony-carriage. I also knew—or what would be the use of servants?—that it was ordered this morning; so I stumped gaily along the road, thinking that at all events I might have an opportunity of saying three words to you at the station, whilst the servants were putting the luggage on, and the dear aunts, who, I presume, cherish a mutual hatred, were wishing each other a tender farewell. But that such a chance as this runaway should befriend me, was more than I ever dared to hope for; and that I should be sitting next you, Kate" (and *so close*, I'm sure he might have added), "in Lady Horsingham's pony-phaeton, is a piece of good luck that in

my wildest moments I never so much as dreamt of. We scarcely ever meet now. There—you needn't drive so fast, the up train don't go by till the half-hour, and every minute is precious, at least to *me*. We are kept sadly apart, Kate. If you can bear it, I can't. I should like to be near you always — always to watch over you and worship you. Confound that pony! he's off again."

Sure enough, Tiny was indulging in more vagaries, as if he meditated a second fit of rebellion; and what with holding him and humouring Mouse, and keeping my head down so as to hide my face from Frank (for I didn't want him to see how I was blushing), I am sure I had enough to do.

"Kate, you must really have pity on me," pursued Frank; "you don't know how miserable I am sometimes" (I wonder what he wanted me to say?), "or how happy you have it in your power to make me. Here we are at that cursed station, and my dream is over! I must be the cripple and the beggar once more — a beggar I am, indeed, Kate, without your affection. When shall we meet again, and where?"

"In London," was all I could answer.

"And you won't forget me, Kate," pleaded poor Frank, looking so handsome, poor fellow.

"*Never*," I replied; and before I knew how it was, I found myself standing on the platform, with aunt Deborah, and the servants, and the luggage.

The great green engine was panting and gasping in front of me, but ponies and pony-carriage and cripple had all vanished like a dream.

As we steamed on to London, I sometimes thought it *was* a dream, not altogether a pleasant one, nor yet exactly the reverse. I should have liked my admirer to have been a little more explicit. It is all very well to talk of being miserable and desperate, and to ring the changes of meeting and parting, and looks and sighs, and all that; but, after all, the real question is, "Will you?" or "Won't you?" and I don't think a man is acting very fairly towards a girl, who don't put the case in that way at once, before he allows himself to run into rhapsodies about his feelings and his sufferings, and such matters, which, after all, lead to nothing, or at least to nothing satisfactory. To be sure, men are strange creatures; and, upon my word, I sometimes think they are more troubled with shyness than our own sex. Perhaps it's their diffidence that makes them hesitate so, and, as it were, beat about the bush, when they have only got to flush the bird and shoot it at once, and put it in the game-bag. Perhaps it's their pride for fear of being refused. Now I think it's far more creditable to a man to wear the willow, and take to men dinners and brandy and water for a month or six weeks, than to break a girl's heart for a whole year; and I know it takes nearly that time for a well-brought-up young lady to get over a real matrimonial

disappointment. However, shy or not shy, they certainly ought to be explicit. It's too bad to miss a chance, because we cannot interpret the metaphor in which some bashful swain thinks it decorous to couch his proposals; and I once knew a young lady who, happening to dislike needlework, and replying in the negative to the insidious question, "Can you sew a button?" never knew for months that she had actually declined a man she was really fond of, with large black whiskers, and two-and-twenty hundred a year. Women can't be too cautious.

CHAPTER XVI

EMBARRAS DE CHOIX

I WAS not sorry to be once again fairly settled in Lowndes Street. Even in the winter, London has its charms. People don't watch everything you do, or carp at everything you say. If there is more apparent constraint, there is more real liberty than in the country. Besides, you have so much society, and everybody is so much pleasanter in the metropolis during December than July. The frost had set in again harder than ever. Brilliant and White Stockings, like "Speir-Adam's steeds," were compelled to "bide in stall." John was lingering at the Lloyds' or elsewhere in the Principality, though expected back every day. Aunt Deborah was still weak, and had only just sufficient energy to forbid Captain Lovell the house, and insist on my never speaking to him. I can't think what she had found out, or what aunt Horsingham had told her; but this I know, that if ever I have a daughter, and I don't want

her to like Mr. Dash, or to be continually thinking about him, I shall not forbid her to speak to him; nor shall I take every opportunity of impressing on her that he is wild, unprincipled, reckless, and dissipated, and that the only redeeming points about him are his agreeable conversation and his good looks. Altogether, I should have been somewhat dull had it not been for Mrs. Lumley; but of that vivacious lady I saw a good deal, and I confess took a far greater pleasure in her society than on our first acquaintance I should have deemed possible. When I am ill at ease with myself, not thoroughly satisfied with my own conduct, I always like the society of fast people; their liberality of sentiment, and general carelessness of demeanour, convey no tacit reproach on my own want of restraint; and I feel more at home with them than with such severe moralists as aunt Horsingham, or hypocritical cousin Amelia. So I drove and shopped and visited with Mrs. Lumley—nay, I was even permitted, as a great favour, to dine with her on one or two occasions; aunt Deborah only stipulating that there should be no male addition to the party, except Mr. Lumley himself, or, as the lady of the house termed him, "her old man."

I confess I liked the "old man," and so I think, in her own way, did his wife. Why she married him I cannot think, more particularly as he had not then succeeded to the comfortable fortune they now enjoy: he was little, old, ugly, decrepit, and

an invalid, but he was good-nature and contentment personified. I believe he had great talents —for all his want of physical beauty, he had a fine head—but these talents were wholly and unsparingly devoted to one pursuit,—he was an entomologist. With a blackbeetle and a microscope he was happy for the day. Piles upon piles of manuscripts had he written upon the forms and classification of the bluebottle fly. He could tell you how many legs are flourished by the house-spider, and was thoroughly versed in the anatomy of the common gnat. This pursuit, or science, as he called it, engrossed his whole attention. It was fortunate he had such an absorbing occupation, inasmuch as his general debility prevented his entering into any amusement out of doors. His wife and he seemed to understand each other perfectly.

"My dear," he would say, when listening to some escapade that it would have been scarcely prudent to trust to some husbands' ears, "I never interfere with your butterflies, and you never trouble yourself about mine. I must, however, do myself the justice to observe, that you get tired of your insects infinitely the soonest of the two."

He never inquired where she went, or what she did, but late or early always received her with the same quiet welcome, the same sly good-humoured smile. I firmly believe that with all her levity, whatever scandal might say, she was a good wife to him. He trusted her implicitly; and I

think she felt his confidence deserved to be respected. Such was not the opinion of the world, I am well aware; but we all know the charitable construction it is so eager to put on a fair face with a loud laugh and a good set of teeth. Dear me! if he looked for a lady that had never been *talked about*, Cæsar might have searched London for a wife in vain. Good Mr. Lumley professed a great affection for me, and would occasionally favour me with long and technical dissertations, on the interior economy of the flea, for example; and once in the fulness of his heart confided to his wife, that "Miss Coventry was really a dear girl: it's my belief, Madge, that if she'd been a man, she'd have been a naturalist." These little dinners were indeed vastly agreeable. Nobody had such a comfortable house, or such a good cook, or so many pretty things, as Mrs. Lumley. Her old man seemed to enjoy the relaxation of ladies' society after his morning labours and researches. With me he was good-humoured and full of fun; at his wife's jokes and stories, most of them somewhat scandalous, he would laugh till he cried.

"I'm responsible for you, Miss Coventry," he would say, with a sly laugh; "you're not fit to be trusted with Madge; upon my life, I believe she is the wildest of the two. If you won't have the carriage, I must walk back with you myself. How far is it, Madge? Do you think I can stay the distance, as you sporting people term it in your inexplicable jargon?"

"Why, you know you can't get a hundred yards, you foolish old man," laughed his wife; "a nice chaperon you'd make for Kate: why she'd have to carry you, and you know you'd tumble off even then. No, no, you and I will stay comfortably here by the fire, and I'll give you your tea, and put you tidily to bed; I shan't be home any other night this week. Kate has a convoy coming for her; haven't you, Kate? *Le beau cousin* will take the best possible care of us; and even prim aunt Deborah won't object to our walking back with *him*. I believe he came up from Wales on purpose. What would somebody else give to take the charge off his hands? You needn't blush, Kate; I can see through a millstone as far as my neighbours. I'm not quite such a fool as I look; am I, old man? There's the door-bell. John, ask Mr. Jones if he won't step up and have some tea."

We were sitting by a blazing fire in the boudoir, a snug and beautiful little room, to which no one was admitted but the lady's especial favourites—even the "old man" never entered it during the day.

"Mr. Jones's compliments, and he hopes you'll excuse him, ma'am," was the footman's answer on his return; "but it's very late, and he promised to bring Miss Coventry back by eleven."

"Well, I'm sure," said Mrs. Lumley, "if I was you, Kate, I shouldn't stand his anticipating his authority in this way. Never mind, be a good girl, and do as you're bid; pop your bonnet on.

Shall I lend you an extra shawl? There, you may give my old man a kiss, if you like. Bless him! he's gone fast asleep. Good-night, Kate; mind you come to luncheon to-morrow, there's a dear." So saying, Mrs. Lumley bid me a most affectionate farewell; and I found myself leaning on John's arm, to walk home through the clear frosty night.

I do like perambulating London streets by gaslight—of course, with a gentleman to take care of one. It is so much pleasanter than being stewed up in a brougham. How I wish it was the fashion for people to take their bonnets out to dinner with them, and walk back in the cool fresh air! If it is delightful even in winter, how much more so in the hot summer nights of the season! Your spirits rise and your nerves brace themselves as you inhale the midnight air, with all its smoky particles, pure by comparison with that which has just been poisoning you in a crowded drawing-room. Your cavalier asks leave to indulge in his "weed," and you enjoy its fragrance at second-hand, as he puffs contentedly away, and chats on in that prosy, confidential sort of manner, which no *man* ever succeeds in assuming, save with a cigar in his mouth. John lit his, of course; but was less communicative, to my fancy, than usual. After asking me if I had enjoyed a pleasant evening, and whether I preferred walking, he relapsed into a somewhat constrained silence. I, too, walked on without

speaking. Much as I love the night, it always makes me rather melancholy; and I daresay we should have got to Lowndes Street without exchanging a syllable, had not some imp of mischief prompted me to cross-examine my cousin a little upon his *séjour* in Wales, and to quiz him, half spitefully, on his supposed *penchant* for pretty Fanny Lloyd. John rose freely in a moment.

"I know where you pick up all this nonsense, Kate," he burst out quite savagely; "I know where half the scandal and half the mischief in London originates! With that odious woman whose house we have just quitted, whose tongue cannot be still for a single moment; who never by any chance speaks a word of truth: and who is seldom so happy as when she is making mischief. I pity that poor decrepit husband of hers, though he ought to keep her in better order; yet it is a hard case upon any man to be tied to such a Jezebel as that."

"The Jezebel, as you call her, John," I interposed quietly, "is my most intimate friend."

"That's exactly what I complain of," urged my cousin; "that's my great objection to her, Kate; that's one of the things that I do believe is driving me out of my senses day by day. You know I don't wish you to associate with her; you know that I object extremely to your being seen everywhere in her company. But you don't care; the more I expostulate, the more obstinate and wilful you seem to become."

It is my turn to be angry now.

"Obstinate and wilful, indeed!" I repeated, drawing myself up. "I should like to know what right you have to apply such terms to me. Who gave you authority to choose my society for me? or to determine where I shall go or what I shall do? You presume on your relationship, John; you take an ungenerous advantage of the regard and affection which I have always entertained for you."

John was mollified in an instant.

"*Do* you entertain regard and affection for me, Kate?" said he; "do you value my good opinion, and consider me as your dearest and best friend?"

"Of course I do, John," was my reply. "Haven't we known each other from childhood? and are you not like a brother to me?"

John's face fell a little, and his voice shook as he spoke: "Am I never to be more than a brother to you? never to obtain a greater interest in you, a larger share of your regard than I have now? Listen to me, Kate—I have something to tell you, and I can put it off no longer. This delay, this uncertainty day by day, I do believe will drive me mad. Kate, I promised aunt Deborah faithfully that I would never enter on this subject till you came of age, and you know by your father's will you don't come of age till you're five-and-twenty. 'By that time, John,' said my aunt, 'Kate will have seen plenty

of others, and be old enough to know her own mind. If she takes you then, she takes you with her eyes open, and she won't get tired of you, and find out she likes someone else better. Promise me, John, that you'll wait till then.' And I did promise, Kate; but I can't keep my word—I can't wait in this state of anxiety and uncertainty, and perhaps lose you after all. It's too great a stake to play for, if one is to be kept so long in suspense, and I have resolved to be put out of my pain one way or the other."

John paused. I had never seen him so excited before; he was quite hot, though the night was keen and frosty; his arm trembled as mine leaned upon it; and though his cigar was gone out, he kept puffing away, utterly unconscious of the fact. He seemed to expect an answer. I hesitated. I did not know what to reply. I had got so accustomed to cousin John, that I never looked upon him in any other light than that of a favourite brother, a constant companion and friend. Moreover, I was not prepared to take any such decisive step as that to which he now seemed to be urging me. There is a great difference between liking people, and giving them power of life and death over one for the rest of one's days. I will not say that the image of another did not rise before me in all its winning beauty, as I had seen it last, scarcely one short week ago. Altogether, I did not know what to say; so I wisely said nothing, but walked on, looking straight before

me, with an uncomfortable feeling that I was driven into a corner, and should ere long be compelled to do that which is always distasteful to our liberty-loving sex—namely, to "make up my mind." John, too, walked on for a few paces in silence. We were at the corner of Lowndes Street. There was not a soul to be seen but our two selves. All at once he stopped short under the light of a lamp, and looked me full in the face.

"Kate," said he, in a grave, deliberate voice, "you know what I mean—Yes or No?"

I shook like a leaf. What would I have given to have been able to take counsel of one of my own sex—Mrs. Lumley, aunt Deborah, or even cold, pitiless Lady Horsingham! But I had to choose for myself. I felt that the turning-point of my destiny had arrived — that the game was in my own hand, and that now I ought to decide one way or the other. I shrank from the responsibility. Like a very woman, I adopted a middle course.

"Give me time, John," I pleaded, "give me time to weigh matters over in my own mind. This is an affair that equally concerns the happiness of each of us. Do not let us decide in a hurry. Aunt Deborah was quite right; her wishes ought to be my law. When I am five-and-twenty, it will be soon enough to enter on this subject again. In the interval, believe me, John, I have the greatest regard and esteem for you."

"Nothing more, Kate?" said John, looking as if he didn't know whether he was pleased or annoyed—"nothing but esteem?"

"Well, I mustn't *say* any more," was my reply; "but you know you have that."

John's face brightened considerably.

"And in the meantime, Kate," he urged, "you won't allow yourself to be entangled with anyone else?"

"Of course not," was my vigorous disclaimer; and by this time we had arrived at my aunt's door, and it was time to say good-night.

"What's the matter, Kate?" exclaimed Mrs. Lumley, when I called to lunch with her the following day, according to promise. "You look pale and worried. For goodness' sake, tell me what has happened. Have you found out *the rover* transferring his adoration to Miss Molasses? or did *mon cousin* take advantage of the hour and the opportunity, to lecture us last night on our love of admiration and general levity of conduct? Tell me all about it, dear. We shan't be disturbed. I'm not at home to a soul, and my old man is busy dissecting an earwig, so he's quite safe till dinner-time. Sit you down on the sofa, out with your pocket-handkerchief, and make a clean breast of it!"

I told her the whole of my conversation with my cousin the previous night, only suppressing the unflattering opinions he had thought fit to express of my present *confidante*.

"And, oh, Madge!" I exclaimed, as I concluded, "how could I sleep a wink last night, with all this to harass and reproach me? No wonder I'm pale and worried, and perfectly miserable. I feel I'm behaving shamefully to John, and not at all rightly towards Captain Lovell. I know I ought to come to an understanding with my cousin, and that Frank ought to be more explicit with me. I couldn't have given a decided answer last night, if my life had depended on it. I can't give up the one without knowing exactly whether he means honestly (if I thought he did, Madge, nothing should induce me to throw him over); and I don't like to make the other miserable, which I am sure I should do if I refused him point-blank; nor do I think I could do at all well without him, accustomed as I have been to depend upon him for everything from childhood. So I have wavered and prevaricated, and behaved disingenuously, almost falsely — and what must he think of me now?"

"Think of you, my dear?" replied my worldly friend; "why of course he thinks of you more than ever. There is nothing like uncertainty, Kate, to keep them well up to the collar. You should always treat men like the beasts of the field. If you want to retain the upper hand of him, ride an adorer as you do Brilliant, my dear: a light hand, with just enough liberty to make him fancy he is going quite at his ease; and then, when he is getting a little careless, and least expects it, give

him such a jerk as makes his fine mouth smart again. He'll wince with the pain, and very likely rear straight on end; but he'll be all on his haunches well under control, and go on much the pleasanter during the rest of the day. Never mind how much they suffer; it's very good for them, and they will like you all the better for it."

"That may answer very well with some," I replied; "but I should be afraid to try the experiment too often. I am sure Brilliant would break away altogether if I used *him* so. And I think the very man that minds it most, would be the least likely to stand a repetition of such treatment. No, Madge, I fear I must now choose between Frank and my cousin. The latter has behaved honourably, considerately, and kindly, and like a thorough gentleman. The former seems to think I am to be at his beck and call, indeed, whenever he chooses. He has never been to see me during the whole of this past week. At Dangerfield, he was as little careful of my reputation as he was of his own limbs. Did I tell you how nearly drowned he was, crossing the moat? How you would have laughed, you wicked unfeeling woman, if you had heard the splash that cold, snowy night! and then to disguise himself like a tramp, and stop those runaway ponies at the risk of his life, that he might speak three words to me before I went away. I will say for him, that he is afraid of nothing; but I cannot conceal from myself which has behaved best towards *me*. And yet, Madge," I concluded,

rising and walking off to the window, "I would rather have Frank for a lover than cousin John for a husband."

"Many people would suggest there was no impossibility in your having both, but I don't give such bad advice as that," replied Mrs. Lumley; "however, Kate, do nothing in a hurry—that's my counsel. I grant you, I think Master Frank a very slippery gentleman. I do know some curious stories about him; but I never tell tales out of school. In the meantime, you are, after all, only suffering from an *embarras de richesses*; it's far better to have too many suitors than none at all. Come, I'll take you out shopping with me till five; then we'll have some tea, and you can go home quietly to dinner, and ask aunt Deborah's leave to join me at the French play. I've got a capital box, and I'll send the carriage for you. Wait half a second, whilst I put on my bonnet."

So we went off shopping, and we had our tea, and I found no objections from aunt Deborah to my going out again in the evening: and I was so restless I did not the least grudge the trouble of dressing, or anything to take me away from my own thoughts. But all the afternoon and all the evening I made up my mind that I would give up Frank Lovell. A little resolution was all that was needed. It was plain he did not really care for me. Why, he wasn't even in London, though he knew quite well I had been there more than a week. Very likely I shouldn't see him all the

winter, and my heart sank as I thought how much easier this would make my sacrifice. At all events I determined, when I did see him, to be cold, and demure, and unmoved, to show him unmistakably that I belonged to another—in which Spartan frame of mind I betook myself to the French play.

Alas, alas! well may the bard complain—

> "Woman's vows are writ in water;
> Woman's faith is traced in sand."

Who should be in the back of the box but Frank Lovell himself! Mischievous Mrs. Lumley, was this your doing? Before I went away, I had promised to meet him next morning in the Park, and he was to *explain all.*

CHAPTER XVII

CAPTAIN LOVELL EXPLAINS

I HOPE I have as much command of countenance as falls to the lot of any lady who don't paint; but when I returned from my walk in the Park, the following morning, I must have looked flushed or excited, or in some way different from usual. I met John at the corner of Lowndes Street, and he stopped short, and looked me piercingly in the face.

"Where have you been, Kate?" said he, without waiting to bid me good-morning or anything.

"A little stroll in the Park, John," was my reply.

"By yourself?" he asked; and his face looked pale and grave.

I cannot tell a story, so I hesitated and stammered—

"No, not exactly—at least I met an acquaintance near the Serpentine."

"Have you any objection to telling me who it was?" said John; and his voice sounded very strange.

"Good gracious! what's the matter?" I asked, in my turn. "Has anything happened? Are you ill, John? You look quite upset."

"I insist upon knowing," answered he, without taking the slightest notice of my tender inquiries after his health. "Did you or did you not meet Captain Lovell this morning in Hyde Park?"

"Yes, I certainly *did* meet him," I replied.

"Accidentally?" exclaimed my cousin.

"Why—no — not entirely," was my answer; "but the fact is"—

"Enough!" burst out John, breaking in upon my explanations with a rudeness I had never before seen him exhibit. "Kate, I have been deceived in you. I thought, at least, you were candid and straightforward: I find you faithless, ungrateful, ungenerous! But I will not reproach you," he added, checking himself by a strong effort: "it is only natural, I conclude, for a woman to be false. I thought you were different from the rest, and I was a fool for my pains. Kate, let us understand each other at once. I offered you last night all that man could give. I had a right to expect an answer then and there. I *thought* I had a favourable one, and I have spent twelve hours of happiness. I now see that I have deceived myself. Perhaps I value my own worth too highly; I own I feel sore and aggrieved, but *you* shall not be the sufferer. Kate, I am only 'Cousin John' once more. Give me a few days to get over a natural disappointment, and you and I will be friends and

playfellows as we used to be. Shake hands, Kate; I spoke harshly, in a moment of anger—it is over now. God bless you, dear!"

And with these words John walked away, and left me standing on that eventful doorstep which seemed to witness all the changes and chances of my life. How stately was his walk as he strode down the street! I watched him all the way to the corner, but he never once looked back. John was grown much handsomer of late; he used to be too ruddy and prosperous-looking and boyish, but his countenance had altered considerably in the last two or three months—only, seeing him every day, I did not remark the change. Lady Scapegrace had found it out the first. I perfectly remember her saying to me, on the day of our Greenwich dinner—

"My dear, your cousin has a great deal in him, if one did but know how to get it *out*. You have no idea what a good-looking man he would be, if you could only succeed in making him ill and unhappy."

Poor John! I am afraid I had made him unhappy, even now. It struck me he had a nobler bearing than Captain Lovell himself; although, of course, I could not think him so graceful, or so handsome, or half so charming as my dear Frank. I rushed into the house and locked myself in my boudoir, to think over and dwell upon the many events of that most eventful morning. My happy walk, my delightful companion, whose soft voice

was still whispering in my ear—whose every look and gesture I could recall, even to the wind freshening his handsome brow and waving his clustering locks. How happy and contented I felt by his side! and yet—there was a something. I was not satisfied — I was not thoroughly at ease: my cousin's face would intrude itself upon my thoughts. I could not get out of my head the tone of manly kindness and regret in which he had last addressed me. I reflected on his sincerity, his generosity, his undeviating fidelity and good-humour, till my heart smote me to think of all he suffered for my sake; and I began to wonder whether I was worthy of being so much cared for, and whether I was justified in throwing all this faith and truth away.

Reader, have you ever lived for weeks and weeks in a place which bored you to death? Have you learned to loathe every tree and shrub and hedge-row in the dreary landscape? Have you shivered up and down the melancholy walks, and yawned through the dull, dark rooms, till you began to think the hour never would arrive that was to restore you once again to liberty and light? And then, when the hour has come at last, have you been able to take your departure without some half-reproachful feeling akin to melancholy—without some slight shade of regret to think that much as you have hated it, you look upon it all now for the last time? Perhaps the sun breaks out and shines upon the old place as you catch your last glimpse. Ah! it never used to shine

like that when you could see it from those windows every day; you almost wish your departure had been put off till the morrow: you think if you were back again, the walks would not be so very melancholy, the rooms no longer so dull and gloomy. You sigh because you are leaving it, and wonder at yourself for doing so. It is the same thing with friends, and more especially with those who would fain assume a tenderer title—we never know their value but by their loss.

"If it wasn't for Frank," I began to think, "I really believe I might have been very happy with cousin John. Of course, it's impossible now; and, as he says himself, he'll never be anything but a cousin to me. Poor John! he's a noble, true-hearted, unselfish, generous fellow."

But to return to my walk. When a lady and gentleman meet each other by appointment, either at the edge of the Serpentine or elsewhere, their conversation is not generally of a nature to be related in detail, nor is it to be presumed that their colloquy would prove as interesting to the general public as to themselves. What I learned of Frank's private history, his views, feelings, and intentions, on that morning, I may as well give in my own words, suppressing divers interruptions, protestations, and interjections, which, much as they added to its zest, necessarily rather impeded the course of the narrative, and postponed its completion till long after I ought to have been back at luncheon.

Frank had been an only child, and spoiled as

only children are in nine cases out of ten. His father was a peer's second son, and married a wealthy cotton-spinner's niece for the sake of her money, which money lasted him about as long as his own constitution. When he died, the widow was left with ten thousand pounds and the handsome, curly-pated, mischievous boy. She soon followed her husband: poor thing, she was very fond of him, and he had neglected her shamefully. The boy went to his uncle—the peer, not his uncle the mill-owner—to be brought up. Frank was consequently what the world calls a "well-bred one"; his name was in the *Peerage*, though he had a first cousin once removed who was but an industrious weaver. The peer, of course, sent him to Eton.

"Ten thousand pounds," said that judicious relative, "will buy him a commission. The lad's handsome and clever; he can play whist now better than my boy's private tutor. By the time his ten thousand's gone, we'll pick up an heiress for him. 'Gad! how like my poor brother he is about the eyes!"

So Frank was started in life with a commission in the Light Dragoons, an extremely good opinion of himself, and as much of his ten thousand pounds as he had not already anticipated during the one term he spent at Oxford before he was rusticated. By the way, so many of my partners, and other young gentlemen with whom I am acquainted, have gone through this process, that it was many

years before I understood the meaning of the term; for long I understood *rustication* to be merely a playful form of expression for taking a degree; and I was the more confirmed in this impression from observing that those who had experienced this treatment were spoken of with high respect and approbation by their fellow-collegians. What odd creatures young men are! I can understand their admiring prowess in field-sports and athletic pursuits, just as I could understand one's admiring a statesman, an author, an artist, or a successful man in any pursuit of life; but why they should think it creditable to get drunk, to run into debt, to set at defiance all the rules and regulations enacted for their own benefit, and to conduct themselves in unswerving opposition to the wishes of their nearest and dearest friends, and all to do themselves as much harm as possible, is more than I can comprehend. Girls are not wrong-headed like this. Where the son is the source of all the annoyance, and ill-humour, and retrenchment in a family, the daughter is generally the mainstay, and comfort, and sunshine of the whole house. When shall we poor women be done justice to?

But to return to Frank. By his own account he was a gambler, of course. A man turned loose upon the world, with such an education as most English gentlemen deem befitting their sons, and without means to indulge the taste that education has led him to acquire, is very likely to become so. As a boy, the example of his elders teaches him

to look upon frivolous distinction as the great end and aim of life, whilst that of his comrades leads him to neglect all study as dry, to despise all application as slow. At home he hears some good-looking, grown-up cousin, or agreeable military uncle, admired and commented on for being such a capital shot—such a good cricket-player—such an undeniable rider to hounds—what wonder the boy grows up thinking that these accomplishments alone are the very essentials of a gentleman? At school, if he makes an effort at distinction in school-hours, he is stigmatised by his comrades as a "sap," and derided for his pursuit of the very object it is natural to suppose he has been sent there to attain. What wonder he hugs idleness as his bosom-friend, and loses all his powers of application in their disuse. Then come the realities of manhood, for which he is so ill prepared. In the absence of all useful knowledge and practical pursuits, amusement becomes the business of life. Human nature cannot be idle, and if not doing good, is pretty sure to be doing harm. Pleasure, excitement, and fashionable dissipation must be purchased, and paid for pretty dearly, in hard coin of the realm. The younger son, with his ten thousand pounds, must soar in the same flight, must go as fast as his elder brother with ten thousand a year. How is it to be done? Why, of course, he must make money, if he can, by betting and play. So it goes on smoothly enough for a time. The

Arch-croupier below, they say, arranges these matters for beginners; but the luck turns at last. The capital is eaten into; the Jews are called in; and the young gentleman is ruined. Frank, I think, at this time was in a fair way of arriving pretty rapidly at the customary catastrophe. He had gone through the whole educational process I have described above, had been regularly and systematically spoilt, was a habitual gambler, and a confirmed dandy. The ladies all liked him much, and I confess I don't wonder at it. Always good-humoured, never sentimental (I hate a sentimental man), invariably well dressed, with a very good opinion of his own attractions, Frank could make himself agreeable in all societies. He had never been troubled with shyness as a boy, and in his manhood was as cool a hand as one would meet with often, even in London. Then he had plenty of courage, which made the men respect him; and, above all, was very good-looking, an advantage which, doubtless, has a certain weight even with *our* far-sighted and reflective sex.

I never quite made out the rights of his *liaison*, or whatever people call it, with Lady Scapegrace; nor do I think his own account entirely satisfactory. He assured me that he met her first of all at a masked ball in Paris, that she mistook him for someone else, and confided a great deal to his ears which she would not have entrusted to anyone save the individual she supposed him to be; that when she discovered her mistake she was in despair, and

that his discretion and respect for her feelings had made her his fast friend for life. I cannot tell how this may be, but that they were great friends, I have had reason to know too well. He declared, however, that he looked upon her "quite as a sister." I do not think, though she is always very kind to me, that I should exactly like her for a *sister-in-law.* I certainly have known Lady Scapegrace do some most extraordinary things—such things as no other woman would be permitted to do without drawing down the abuse of the world; if she had been fair, and rosy, and pleasing, people would have scouted her; but she was dark, and stern, and commanding. The world was afraid of her, and it is very true that in the world one had better be feared than loved. Scandal did not dare say all it thought of Lady Scapegrace; and if she brought Frank Lovell home in her carriage, or went to the opera alone with Count Coquin, or was seen, day after day, perambulating Kensington Gardens arm-in-arm with young Greenfinch, of the Life Guards, instead of shouting and hissing, and, so to speak, pelting her off the stage, the world lifted its fingers to its lips, shrugged up its worldly shoulders, and merely remarked—

"Always *was* very odd, poor woman! Hers has been a curious history—little cracked, I think, now—but what a handsome creature she was years ago, when I left school, before *you* were born, my boy!"

Whatever may have been her carelessness of

appearances and levity of manner, I think it was never for an instant supposed that she liked any human being half so much as she hated Sir Guy.

Then, again, Sir Guy and Frank were fast friends, almost inseparable. They say Frank kept things right between the ill-assorted pair, and that his good offices had many a time interposed to prevent scenes of abuse and violence such as must have ended in a separation at least. I was not quite clear that Frank's regard for the coach-driving baronet was alone at the bottom of all this friendship. I cannot conceive two men much worse suited to each other; but Frank vowed, when I cross-questioned him on the subject, which I thought I had a right to do, that he was under the greatest possible obligations to Sir Guy, that the latter had even lent him money, and stood by him when such assistance was most valuable; and that he looked upon him as a brother, just as he looked upon her ladyship as a sister. It seems to have been quite a family party altogether. Frank warmed with the topic.

"You will hear me talked about with all sorts of people, Kate," said he, as we took about our twentieth turn, each of which I had protested should be the last; "but the world is so officious and mischief-making, you must never believe a word it says. They know I am ruined, and they choose to decide that I must be making up to some wealthy young lady. As if I was a man to marry

for money! as if I cared for anything on earth but one person, and that for the sake of her own dear self alone. You ask me about Miss Molasses; you declare I am continually riding with her, and dancing with her, and what you ladies call paying her attention—that yellow lackadaisical miss! Do you think I would marry her if she had half a million? Do you think I could stand those sentimental airs, that smattering of learning, and affectation of being poetical, and romantic, and blue? I, who have only lately learned what a woman should be, and what a treasure such a woman is! No, no; I have known the whole family from a child; I can't quite stand the lady part of it, but old Molasses is a right good fellow, and one must be civil to them all. No, no, Kate, with my many faults, I am a very different person from what you seem to think. I have my hopes and wishes, certainly, but"—

I can't possibly go on to relate the conclusion of Frank's rhapsody, but he took great pains to convince me that if there was ever a high-principled, pure-minded, much-injured individual, that exemplary character was the gentleman now walking by my side; and I *was* convinced, but at the same time not exactly satisfied. In thinking over the whole of our conversation, I could gather nothing very definite, nothing that led to any particular result, from it.

One thing was clear to my mind, and that was at all events a gratifying reflection. Frank did

not seem to be aware that I had any worldly prospects whatever — it was evident that if he liked me he liked me entirely for myself. I confess I should not wish to be a great heiress ; I should always be fancying that it was the "fine eyes of my casket," as the French say, which attracted my admirers ; and I could not stand that. No, Frank was not mercenary, I was sure, and if ever—why the competency I should be possessed of would be an agreeable surprise. If, indeed! Nothing was clear, nothing was settled ; what a fool I was to dwell so upon an uncertainty, to anchor my hopes upon a dream ! I was not at all comfortable that afternoon : the more I thought, the more I walked about my boudoir, in a state of high fidget and restlessness. One thing, however, was consolatory —the frost was breaking. Already in London it was a decided thaw, and I went to pay Brilliant a visit in the stable.

Now I daresay I shall be considered very bold and unladylike, and unfeminine—that's the word— for owning that I do indeed enjoy paying my favourites a visit in their comfortable quarters. It's worth a good deal to see Brilliant's reception of me when I approach his stable. From the instant I enter his abode and he hears my voice, he begins to move restlessly to and fro, whisking his dear tail, cocking his ears, and pawing up his litter, till indeed that word alone describes the state to which he reduces his bed ; then when I go up to him he lays back his ears with sheer delight,

and gives a jump, as if he was going to kick me, and whisks that thin tail about more than ever. I lay my cheek to his smooth soft skin, and he nestles his beautiful head in my arms, and pokes his pretty muzzle into my pockets, and seems to ask for bits of bread and sugar and other delicacies, all of which are conferred upon him forthwith. I am sure he has more sense than a dog, and a great deal more affection than most men. I don't care how slang and bad style people may think me, but I feel every one of those strong flat black legs, and look into his hoofs, hind feet and all, and turn his rug up to see that he has been properly cleaned and treated as he deserves; for I love Brilliant, and Brilliant loves me. It has sometimes been my lot to have an aching heart, as I conclude it is the lot of all here below. Like the rest of my fellow-creatures, I have been stung by ingratitude, lacerated by indifference where I had a right to expect attachment; or, worst of all, forced to confess myself deceived where I had bestowed regard and esteem. When I feel sore and unhappy on any or all of these points, nothing consoles and softens me so much as the affection of a dumb animal, more particularly a horse. His honest grave face seems to sympathise in one's grief, without obtruding the impertinence of curiosity or the mockery of consolation. He gives freely the affection one has been disappointed in finding elsewhere, and seems to stand by one in his brute vigour and generous unreasoning nature like a true

friend. I always feel inclined to pour my griefs into poor Brilliant's unintelligent ears, and many a tear have I shed nestling close to my favourite, with my arms round him like a child's round its nurse's neck. That very afternoon, when I had made sure there was no one else in the stable, I leaned my head against Brilliant's firm warm neck, and sobbed, like a fool as I was.

CHAPTER XVIII

A DAY WITH THE QUEEN'S

GENTLEMEN think it right to affect a contempt for stag-hunting, and many a battle have I had with cousin John when he has provoked me by pooh-poohing that exhilarating amusement. I generally get the best of the argument: I put a few pertinent questions to him which he cannot answer satisfactorily. I ask him, "What is your principal object in going out hunting? Is it to learn the habits of the wild animal, or to watch the instinct of the hound that pursues him? Do you enjoy seeing a fox *walked* to death, as you call it, on a cold scenting day—or do you care for the finest hunting run that ever was seen in a woodland country? Have I not heard you say a hundred times, when questioned as to your morning sport, 'Oh, wretched! hounds never went any pace! —couldn't shake off the crowd—yes, we killed our fox; but the whole thing was dead slow'? or else exclaim, with a face of delight, 'The fastest thing I have seen for years! Eighteen minutes *up wind*, extra pace! not a soul but myself in the same field with them when they threw their heads

up. Fox was back, of course, and we never recovered him, but it was by far the best gallop of the season!'? It is evident to me that what you like is riding a good hunter fast over a stiff country—going a turn better than your neighbours, and giving your own skill that credit which is due to the superiority of your horse. You only consider the hounds as a fleeting object at which to ride; the fox as a necessary evil, without which all this rasping and bruising and cutting down, as you call it in your ridiculous jargon, cannot be attained. Why, then, do you waste so much energy, and money, and civility, and soft-sawder, to preserve the vulpine race? Why don't you all hunt with stag-hounds, or, better still, devote yourselves to a drag, when you may gallop and jump and bustle about, and upset your horses, and break your own necks to your heart's content?"

To all of which John answers, as men invariably do when they are worsted, that "women can't enter into these things, and I am talking great nonsense about what I don't understand." However, let him despise "the calf," as he termed it, as much as he liked, I was not going to be stewed up in London, with the wind at south-west, the thermometer 45°, and the mud over one's ankles, whilst Brilliant and White Stockings were eating their heads off in the stable; so I took advantage of John's good-nature to exact a promise that he would take me down and show me Her Majesty's

stag-hounds in the field; and on the express stipulation that Mrs. Lumley should join our party, and that we should confine ourselves religiously to the lanes, I was promised the enjoyment of a day's hunting. John did everything I asked him now, he was even kinder than he used to be, but it was a different sort of kindness, and it cut me to the heart.

Still, the idea was enchanting: the Great Western made a delightful cover-hack. We sent our horses on by the early train. The place of meeting was scarcely three miles from the station, so we had time to settle ourselves comfortably in the saddle, and to avoid the fuss and parade of two ladies in their habits stepping out of a first-class carriage into the midst of a metropolitan field. I ran my eye jealously over the brown mare as Mrs. Lumley jogged quietly along by my side, and I confess I had my misgivings whilst contemplating the easy pliant seat and firm graceful figure of her mistress, the strong lengthy frame and beautiful proportions of the mare herself; but then, Brilliant felt so light and elastic under me, the day was so soft and fresh, the country air so fragrant, and the dewdrops sparkling so brilliantly on the leafless hedges, that my courage rose with my spirits, and I felt as if I could ride anywhere or do anything in sheer gladness of heart.

"Mr. Jones is very strict," said my companion, taking the brown mare lightly on the curb, and putting her into a canter along a level piece of

sward by the roadside; "he declares he only takes charge of us under the solemn promise that there is to be no jumping. For my part, I *never* do what I am told, Kate; do you?"

"I always do as I like with John," said I; "but then I always like to do what he wishes."

My cousin's sorrowful smile almost brought the tears into my eyes.

"I daresay he's quite right," rejoined Mrs. Lumley; "for my part, I've no nerves left now; if you'll promise not to jump, I'll promise too. What say you, Kate—is it a bargain?"

"Agreed," I replied; and just then a turn in the lane brought us into full view of the meet of Her Majesty's stag-hounds.

What a motley assemblage it was! At first I could not catch a glimpse of the hounds themselves, or even the servants, for the crowd, mostly of foot-people, that surrounded them. Where did these queer-looking pedestrians come from? They were not agricultural labourers; they were not towns-people, nor operatives, nor mechanics; they were the sort of people that one never sees except on such an occasion as this. I believe if I was in the habit of attending low pigeon-matches, dog-fights, or steeple-chases, in the Harrow country, I should recognise most of them enjoying the spectacle of such diversions. One peculiarity I remarked amongst them, with scarcely an exception. Although in the last stage of shabbiness, their clothes had all been once of fashionable

texture and good material; but they entirely neglected the "unities" in their personal apparel. A broadcloth coat, much the worse for wear, was invariably surmounted by a greasy cap; whilst he who rejoiced in a beaver, usually battered in at the crown and encircled by a tag of threadbare crape, was safe to have discarded his upper garment, and to appear in his waistcoat and shirt-sleeves. A wiry sweep, in the full uniform of his profession, was by far the most respectable-looking personage of the lot. They clustered round the pack, and seemed to make remarks, more or less sarcastic, amongst themselves. As they opened out a little, I observed a very aristocratic-looking old man, clad in most gorgeous apparel of scarlet and gold, and seated on a remarkably handsome, powerful horse, long and low, with great strength in small compass, and to all appearance quite thoroughbred.

"That's the huntsman," said Mrs. Lumley, who kindly undertook to be my *cicerone*, for she often enjoyed "a day with the Queen's," and was quite at home here; "he'll be so glad to see me. We're great friends—if you like, Kate, I'll introduce you."

I declined the honour as rather too public.

"But," said I, "do tell me who is in that green carriage with its back to us. Is it Prince Albert?"

Mrs. Lumley laughed.

"Not exactly, my dear," she replied; "that's the calf! Come a little this way; and when they open the door, we shall see him bounce out."

So we edged our horses off to a spot at which the foot-people were already beginning to congregate, and sat there quietly anticipating the "enlargement of the deer."

"What are we waiting for now?" I asked, at length, when my patience was nearly worn out. "Why don't we begin?"

"The Master of the Buckhounds, of course," replied my *cicerone*. "He's not come yet. You know, Kate, it's a political appointment, and they generally give it to somebody who hates hunting, and particularly stag-hunting, more than anything; so, of course, he wisely comes as late and goes home as early as he can. But this man is a good sportsman and a thorough gentleman, and very fond of it too; so we shall not have to wait much longer."

In fact, the words were hardly out of her mouth, before a carriage-and-four drove up, containing three very gentlemanlike, good-looking men, got up to the utmost extent of hunting splendour, and looking the very personification of that dandyism which Melton engrafted upon London would be likely to produce. When they were mounted, I am obliged to confess that those magnificent animals made Brilliant himself look small. By this time there was great excitement amongst the foot-people; and an official in gold-lace, a sort of mounted beadle, riding up with a heavy-thonged whip, cleared a lane at the back of the cart which I had so erroneously imagined to contain the

Prince Consort. The doors flew open, and I was all eyes to witness the magnificent sight of the monarch of the waste leaping forth into the sunshine, exulting in his freedom. Shall I confess that I was somewhat disappointed?

A neutral-coloured beast, something like a donkey, bundled out in a clumsy, unwilling sort of manner, and on his egress commenced cropping the grass with the utmost *sang froid* and placidity. My friend the sweep threw his cap at him. He raised his head, shorn of its branching honours, and, after staring about him, trotted quietly off amongst the spectators, closely followed by two well-mounted officials, termed, I believe, "flappers" by disrespectful sportsmen; but whose duty, it appears, is to keep the chase in view till it either beats them off for pace, or leaves them planted at some large awkward impediment, the latter obstacle generally presenting itself in about three fields. On this occasion I saw the deer trot quite composedly up to a high thorn fence of at least six feet, and clear it without an effort; whereon its pursuers, looking blandly around for gate or gap, and finding none, prudently returned to their fellow-officials in scarlet and gold-lace—I conclude, to report upon their own inefficiency. In the meantime, nobody seemed to be in a hurry; there was, indeed, some slight stir among the equestrians; but there was no throwing away of cigars—no drawing of girths and taking up of curb-chains—none of the bustle and confusion created by the departure of a wild

fox over a grass country. On the contrary, everyone here seemed to know exactly how much time he had to spare. We ladies were naturally the most impatient of the throng. Presently the huntsman looked at his watch, and said something to the noble Master, who looked at his, and replied, "I think we may begin."

There was a slight bustle among the knowing ones; two or three officers of the Life Guards stole forward a few paces; one of the officials cracked his whip; and ere I knew exactly what had happened, the hounds were streaming away over an adjoining field, heads up and sterns down, running perfectly mute, but at a pace which would have astonished my old friends of the Heavytop country to no small extent. Several desperate speculators were making frightful efforts for a start. Two of the Life Guardsmen were settled with the hounds, and the third would have been, had he not been turned over by an uncompromising flight of rails. Four London dealers and a young Berkshire farmer were flourishing about, determined to show their horses whilst they were fresh; the noble Master and his aristocratic friends were pounding down a lane running parallel to the line of chase. Mrs. Lumley was getting excited, and the Gitana reared straight on end. Brilliant was fighting most disagreeably with his bridle, and John nervously endeavouring to quiet our horses, and prevail on ourselves to submit to his guidance. We did follow him into the lane; but here what a

scene of confusion it was! Mild equestrians, much at the mercy of their infuriated steeds; hot foot-people, springing out of the way of the charging squadrons, and revenging themselves for threatened annihilation by sarcastic jeers, not altogether undeserved.

"Give me a lead, sir!" implored a good-looking light-weight—who was evidently not in his usual place, and most anxious to get out of the lane—to a fat, jolly old sportsman in a green coat and brass buttons, on a stiff bay horse.

"Certainly, sir," said the good-natured man; and turned his horse short at the fence, closely followed by the gentleman he was so ready to oblige. The bank was rotten and the bay horse unwilling. As might have been expected, the green coat kissed mother earth; whilst his own horse and his pursuer and his pursuer's horse rolled about on the top of him in a most complicated game of all-fours. As they picked each other up, I heard the fat man in green, much to my astonishment, apologising for the accident with the greatest *empressement*.

"A thousand pardons, my dear sir! How could I be so clumsy?—it might have been a most serious accident!" All of which excuses the aggressor, as was to be expected, received with boundless affability and good-humour. In the meantime we had a beautiful view of the run. The hounds were still streaming away, two fields in front of everyone; the huntsman and the two

officers going gallantly abreast in their wake. One of them reminded me a little of Frank Lovell. The noble Master, too, had cut in, and was striding along over every obstacle; the London dealers had dropped somewhat in the rear, and the farmer's horse was already completely sobered by the pace. The hounds turned towards us. John entreated us to stop. They crossed the lane under our horses' heads, and taking up the scent in the adjoining pasture, went off again at score—not a soul *really* with them.

"Flesh and blood can't stand this!" exclaimed Mrs. Lumley, as turning the Gitana short round at a high stile with a foot-board, she landed lightly in the field. "Don't attempt it, Kate!" she screamed out to me, half turning in her saddle. I heard John's voice too, raised in expostulation, but it was too late. I was already in the air. I thought Brilliant never would come to the ground; and when he did touch it, he was so excited with his previous restraint and his present position, that he broke clean away with me. I was a little frightened, but I never lost my nerve. I flew past Mrs. Lumley like an arrow; and though she put the Gitana to her speed, and made my horse more violent still as she thundered close upon his quarters, I was too proud to ask her to give me a pull, and a wicked, jealous feeling rose in my heart that was an excellent substitute for true courage at the time. My horse was almost frantic; but fortunately he knew my voice, and by speaking to him I was able

to steady him before we reached the fence. He bounded over it like a deer, and went quite quietly, now that he had nothing before him but the hounds. I had never known till now what it was to ride for myself. Hitherto I had always followed a leader, but henceforth I resolved to enjoy the true pleasure of finding my own way. I looked back—I was positively *first*, but Mrs. Lumley was not fifty yards behind me, and coming up rapidly.

"Well done, Kate!" said she, as we flew our third fence side by side. Still the hounds fleeted on, and I never took my eye off them, but urged my horse in their wake, taking every turn they did, and swerving from nothing. Fortunately, Brilliant was thoroughbred and the fences light, or, even with my weight, such a style of riding must soon have produced fatal results. I shall never go again as well as I did that day; but do what I would I could not shake off Mrs. Lumley. If I lost sight of her for an instant, she was sure to gain a turn upon me, and on one or two occasions she was actually in my front. I felt I could have ridden into a chalk-pit, and dared her to follow me with the greatest satisfaction. At last the hounds checked; we stood alone with them; I felt almost delirious with the excitement.

"What an example we have made of the gentlemen! Kate," said Mrs. Lumley, turning the Gitana's head to the wind. "I had no idea you could ride like this."

I did not answer, but I thought "Wait a little,

and I'll show you." I felt I hated her, though she *was* my friend. Again the hounds stooped to the scent; they crossed a deep narrow lane, up which I saw the crowd advancing. I put my horse into his pace.

"You can't go there, Kate," vociferated Mrs. Lumley. "This way; here's a gate in this corner."

I clenched my teeth, and rode straight for the fence. It looked dark and forbidding. I did not see how it was to be done, but I trusted to Brilliant, and Brilliant nearly did it—but *not quite*. There was a loud crash; one of my pommels gave me an awkward dig in the side. I saw the white star on my horse's forehead shoot below me; and the muddy, gravelly lane seemed to rise in my face and rasp my hands and smear my habit, and get conglomerated with my hair. The horsemen were all round me when I got up. I did not care for my accident; I did not care for being bruised—in fact, I did not know whether I was hurt or not—but my prevailing feeling was one of burning shame and horror as I thought of my dress. To have had a fall amongst all those men! I could have sunk into the earth and thanked it for covering me. But there was no lack of sympathy and assistance. The huntsman pulled up; the noble Master offered me his carriage to go back to London; everybody stopped to tender advice and condolences.

"The lady's had a fall."—"Give the lady some sherry."—"Catch the lady's horse."—"Can

we render the lady any assistance?" John, of course, was much distressed and annoyed, but glad to find I was not seriously hurt. Mrs. Lumley only stood aloof and sneered. "I told you not to ride there, Kate," said she; "and what a fall you've had — amongst all these people, too!" She very nearly made me an enemy for life.

I was too much hurt to go on. The stag was taken, as usual, in a large pond about a mile from where I met with my accident; but our party had had enough of hunting for one day. I am sure I had; and I think the Gitana was nearly beat, though her mistress would not confess it. We soon got back to the station, where I washed my face and put myself to rights. After all, I was very little the worse, and everybody said I had gone like a bird. As we returned to London by the fast train, and I sat in that comfortable, well-cushioned carriage, enjoying the delightful languor of rest after fatigue, I half resolved to devote my whole life to a sport which was capable of affording such thrilling excitement as that which I had so recently enjoyed. I had never been so happy, I thought, in my existence, as whilst I was leading the field on my dear Brilliant. It was a pure, wholesome, legitimate excitement; there were no harassing doubts and fears, no wounded feelings and bitter thoughts, no hours and days of suspense and misery to atone for a few short moments of delight. If I was disappointed in other things, could I not devote

myself wholly to hunting, and so lead a happy and harmless life? If I had been a man, I should have answered in the affirmative; but I am a woman, and gradually softer thoughts stole over me. A distant vision of a happy home, with home interests and home pleasures — others to love, others to care for, besides myself — all a woman's duties, and all a woman's best delights. I shut my eyes, and tried to realise the picture. When I opened them again, Mrs. Lumley had gone fast to sleep; but John was watching me with a look of painful attention. He certainly had acquired a very earnest, keen look of late, such as he never used to wear. I do not know what prompted the question, but I could not forbear asking him, in a sort of half-laughing way, "John, if I had broken my neck to-day, what on earth should you have done?"

"Mourned for you *as a sister*, Kate," he replied gravely, even severely.

I did not speak another word the whole way home.

CHAPTER XIX

SCAMPERLEY PARK

"I SHALL miss you sadly, Kate; but if you enjoy your visit I shall be quite satisfied."

It was aunt Deborah who spoke. Dear aunt Deborah! I felt as if I had not been half attentive enough to her lately. I had selfishly been so taken up with my own thoughts and my own schemes, that I had neglected my poor suffering relative; and now my heart smote me for my want of consideration. Aunt Deborah had not left the house since our return from Dangerfield. She looked worn and old, but had the same kind smile, the same measured accents as ever. Though she endured a good deal of pain and was kept in close confinement, she never complained: patient and quiet, she had a kind word for everyone; and even her maid avowed that "missus's" temper was that of an angel. "H'angel," the maid called it, but it was perfectly true. Aunt Deborah must have had something very satisfactory to look

forward to, or she never would have been so light-hearted. One thing I remarked—she was fonder of John than ever.

"I won't go, my dear aunt," was my reply, for my conscience smote me hard. "I won't go; I don't care about it; I had much rather stay and nurse you here."

But aunt Deborah wouldn't hear of it.

"No, no," said she, "my dear; you are at the right age to enjoy yourself. I don't know much about Scamperley, and I have a far more charitable opinion of Lady Scapegrace than the world in general; but I daresay you will have a pleasant party, and I can trust you anywhere with John."

There it was, John again—always John—and I knew exactly what John thought of me; and it made me thoroughly despise myself. I reflected that if I were John, I should have a very poor opinion of my cousin; I should consider her silly, vacillating, easily deceived, and by no means to be depended upon; more than woman in her weaknesses, and less than woman in her affections. "What a character! and what a contempt he must have for me!"

My cousin called to take me to the railway, and to accompany me as a chaperon on a visit to Sir Guy and Lady Scapegrace, who were, as usual, entertaining a distinguished party of fashionables at their residence, Scamperley. By the way, what an odd phrase that same "entertaining" always sounds to my ear. When I learn that "the

Marquis of Mopes has been entertaining his friends, the Duke of Drearyshire, Count and Countess Crotchet, Viscount Inane, Sir Simon and Lady Sulkes, the Honourable Hercules Heavyhead, etc. etc., at his splendid seat, Boudoir Castle," I cannot refrain from picturing to myself the dignified host standing on his bald head for the amusement of his immovable visitors, or otherwise, forgetful of his usual staid demeanour, performing ludicrous antics, projecting disrespectful larks, to woo a smile from those stolid countenances in vain! Sir Guy might be "entertaining," too, in this way, but hardly in any other. What a disagreeable man he was! although I could not help acknowledging his good-nature in coming to fetch us from the station himself. As we emerged from the railway-carriage, the first object that greeted my eyes was Sir Guy's great gaudy drag, with its three piebalds and a roan. The first tones that smote on my ear were those of his hoarse harsh voice (how it jarred upon my nerves!) in loud obstreperous welcome—

"Thought you'd come by this train, Miss Coventry," shouted Sir Guy from the box, without making the slightest demonstration of descending; "laid Frank five to two on the event—done him again, hey, Frank! I knew what you'd be up to; brought the drag over on purpose. Now then, give us your hand; one foot on the box, one on the roller-bolt, and now you're landed. Jones, my boy, get up behind. I've sent the van for servants

and luggage. 'Gad! what a pretty maid you've got—let 'em go, and sit tight!"

So we rolled smoothly out, the piebalds shaking their harness and trotting merrily along, the roan placed on the off-side, for the purpose of sustaining whatever amount of punishment our charioteer thought fit to inflict.

Behold me, then, seated on the box of Sir Guy Scapegrace's drag! a pretty position for a young lady who, during the last month or two, had been making daily resolutions of amendment as to slang conduct and general levity of demeanour. How I hated myself, and loathed the very sight of him, as I looked at my companion. Sir Guy was redder and fatter than when I had seen him last—his voice was more dissonant, his neckcloth more alarming, his jewellery more prominent, his hat closer shaved and the flower in his mouth less like a flower than ever. How came I there? Why, because I was piqued, and hurt, and reckless. I was capable of almost any enormity. John's manner to me in the train had well-nigh driven me mad—so quiet, so composed, so cold, so kind and considerate, but a kindness and consideration such as that with which one treats a child. He seemed to feel he was my superior—he seemed even to soothe and pity me. I would have given worlds to have spoken frankly out to him, to have asked him what I had done to offend him, even to have brought him back to that topic upon which I felt he would never enter more. But it was impossible.

I dared not wound that kind, generous heart again —I dared not trust myself. No, he was only "Cousin John" now; he had said so himself. Surely he need not have given me up quite so easily; surely I was worthy of an effort at least: yet I knew it had been my own fault—though I would not allow it even to myself—and this I believe it was that rankled and gnawed at my heart till I could hardly bear my own identity. It was a relief to do everything I could think of to annoy him—to heap self-contempt on my wicked head, to show him I was reckless of his good opinion as of my own, to lay up a store of agonising reproaches for the future, to gnash my teeth, as it were, and nerve myself into a savage indifference for the present. Nay, there was even a diabolical pleasure in it. Frank Lovell occupied the seat behind me: at another time I might have been gratified at his near neighbourhood, and annoyed to think he should have been paying so long a visit to Scamperley. I was startled to find how little I cared. He leaned over and whispered to me occasionally, and seemed pleased with the marked encouragement I gave him. After all, I could not help liking Frank very much—and was not my cousin at the back of the coach, to witness all that took place? But Sir Guy would not allow me to be monopolised, as he called it.

"You've lost your roses sadly in London, Miss Coventry," said he, poking his odious face almost under my bonnet, and double-thonging the off-

wheeler most unmercifully. "Never mind; I think a woman looks best when she is pale. Egad, you've more colour now, though. Don't be angry, it's only my way; you know I'm your slave."

"Sir Guy don't mean to be rude," whispered Frank, for I confess I was beginning to get indignant; and the baronet went on—

"Do you remember our picnic at Richmond, Miss Coventry, and my promise, that if ever you honoured me by taking a place on my coach you should drive? Take hold of 'em now, there's a good girl; you ought to know something about the ribbons, and the next four miles is quite straight, and a dead flat."

I was in that state of mind that I should not have had the least scruple in upsetting the coach, and risking the lives of all upon it, my own included; but I know not what imp of evil prompted me to turn round and call to my cousin at the back—

"John, do you think I could drive four horses?"

"Pray don't," whispered Frank Lovell, who seemed to disapprove of the whole proceeding; but I did not heed him, for my cousin never answered till I asked him again.

"Do as you like, Kate," was his reply, "only I shouldn't advise you to try;" but he looked very grave, and seriously hurt and annoyed.

This was enough for me—I laughed aloud—I was determined to provoke him, and I changed

places with Sir Guy. He showed me how to part and hold the reins; he lectured me on the art of putting horses together; he got into a state of high good-humour, and smiled, and swore, and patronised me, and had the effrontery to call me a "d——d fine girl," and I never boxed his ears, though I confess to having been once or twice sorely tempted. In short, I flirted with him shamefully, and even Frank got grave and out of sorts. At last Sir Guy removed the flower from his mouth, and pulled out his cigar-case.

"Have a weed, Miss Coventry!" said he, with his detestable leer. "Of course you smoke; any one who can tool 'em along as you do *must* be able to smoke—mine are very mild, let me choose one for you."

I accepted his offer, though I had considerable misgivings as to whether it would not make me sick. I looked round to see how my cousin approved of all these goings on, and particularly this last cigar movement. He was sitting with his back to us, reading the morning newspaper, apparently totally indifferent to my proceedings. That decided me. I would have smoked now if there had been a barrel of gunpowder under my nose. I didn't care how sick it made me! I lit my cigar from Sir Guy's—I suffered him to put his horrid red face close to mine—I flirted, and laughed, and drove, and puffed away as if I had been used to these accomplishments all my life. I rattled through the turnpike without stopping to pay, as if

"He showed me how to hold the reins."

it were a good joke. I double-thonged a sleeping carter over the face and eyes as I passed him. My near leader shied at a wheelbarrow, and I *almost* swore as I rated him and flanked him, and exclaimed—

"Confound you, *I'll* teach you to keep straight!"

As we drove into the park at Scamperley —for I fearlessly rounded the avenue turn, and vowed I would not abandon the reins till I had delivered my load at the front door—even Frank was completely disgusted. My cousin took not the slightest notice, but kept his seat with his back turned to the horses, and was still deep in his newspaper. Sir Guy was delighted; he shouted, and grinned, and swore more than ever. I was a trump—I was a girl of the right sort—I was a well-bred one—I had no end of devil in me—I was fit to be a queen! whilst the object of all these polished encomiums could willingly have burst out crying at a moment's notice; indeed, she would have found it an unspeakable relief; and felt as she had never felt before, and as she trusts in heaven she may never feel again.

It was a lovely spot, Scamperley—beautiful as a dream—with the quiet woodland beauty of a real English place. Such timber! Such an avenue! I wonder if any of the sporting dandies and thoughtless visitors who came down "to stay with Scapegrace," because he had more pheasants and better "dry" (meaning champagne) than anybody

else, ever thought of the many proprietors those old oaks and chestnuts had seen pass away—the strange doings they must have witnessed as generation after generation of Scapegraces lived their short hour and went to their account, having done all the mischief they could—for they were a wild, wicked race, from father to son. The present baronet's childhood was nursed in profligacy and excess. Sir Gilbert had been a fitting sire to Sir Guy, and drank, and drove, and sinned, and turned his wife out of doors, and gathered his boon-companions about him, and placed his heir, a little child, upon the table, and baptized him, in mockery, with blood-red wine; and one fine morning he was found dead in his dressing-room, with a dark stream stealing slowly along the floor. They talked of broken blood-vessels, and hard living, and a full habit; but some people thought he had died by his own hand; and the dressing-room was shut up and made a lumber-room of, and nobody ever used it any more. However, it was the only thing to save the family. A long minority put the present possessor fairly on his legs again, and the oaks and the chestnuts were spared the fate that had seemed too surely awaiting them. Nor was this the only escape they had experienced. A Scapegrace of former days had served in the Parliamentary army during his father's lifetime; had gone over to the king at his death; had fought at Edgehill and Marston Moor—and to do Sir Neville justice, he could fight like a demon;

had abandoned the royal cause when it was hopeless, and, by betraying his sovereign, escaped the usual fate and amercement of malcontents; the Protector remarking, with a certain solemn humour, "that Sir Neville was an instrument in the hand of the Lord, but that Satan had a share in him, which doubtless he would not fail to claim in due time." So Sir Neville lived at Scamperley in abundance and honour, and preserved his oaks and his rents, and professed the strictest Puritanism; and died in a fit brought on by excessive drinking to the success of the Restoration, when he heard that Charles had landed, and the king was really to enjoy his own again. He was succeeded by his grandson Sir Montague, the best-looking, the best-hearted, and the weakest of his race; there was a picture of him hanging over against the great staircase—a handsome, well-proportioned man, with a woman's beauty of countenance, and more than womanly softness of expression. Lady Scapegrace and I have stopped and gazed at it for hours.

"He's not very like the present baronet, my dear," she would say, her haughty features gathering into a sneer—and Lady Scapegrace's sneer was that of Mephistopheles himself: "he is beautiful, exceedingly. I love to look at his hazel eyes, his low antique brow, his silky chestnut hair, and his sweet melancholy smile. Depend upon it, Kate, no man with such a smile as that is ever capable of succeeding in any one thing he undertakes. I don't care what his intellect may

be, I don't care what animal courage he may possess, however dashing his spirit, however chivalrous his sentiments—so surely as he has woman's strength of affection, woman's weakness of heart, so surely must he go to the wall. I have seen it a hundred times, Kate, and I never knew it otherwise."

Since the affair of the bull, Lady Scapegrace had contracted a great affection for me, and would have me to roam about the house with her for hours. She was a clever intellectual woman, without one idea or sentiment in common with her husband. In this state of mental widowhood she had consoled herself by study, amongst other things; and the history of the family into which she had married afforded her ample materials for reflection and research. She had collected every scrap of writing, every private memorandum, letter, and document that could throw any light upon the subject; and I verily believe she could have concocted a highly interesting volume, detailing the exploits and misdeeds, the fortunes and misfortunes, of the Scapegraces.

"I know all about him, Kate," she would proceed, fixing her great hollow eyes upon my face, and laying her hand on my arm, as was her habit when interested; "he is my pet amongst the family, though I despise him thoroughly. You see that distant castle, sufficiently badly painted, in the corner of the picture? That was the residence of her who exercised such a fatal influence over the

life of poor Sir Montague. All his little sonnets, some of them touching and pretty enough, are addressed to the Lady Mabel. I have found two or three of his love-letters, probably returned by her, tied up in a faded bit of ribbon. There is also one note from the lady to her admirer; such a production, Kate! Not a word but what is misspelt, not a sentence of common grammar in the whole of it; and yet this was the woman he broke his heart for! Look well at him, my dear, and you will see why, with all its beauty, such a face as that was made to be imposed upon. The Lady Mabel, however, seems to have been a notable strong-minded personage enough. She acknowledges the receipt of her lover's letters; which, however, without condescending to give any further explanation, she avers 'came to hand at an untoward moment,' and finishes by sending him a receipt for making elderflower wine—assuring him, with a certain sly malice, that it is 'a sovereign specific against colic, vertigo, and all ailments of the heart and stomach!' What a contrast to his protestations endorsed, 'These, with haste—ride—ride—ride!' which many a good horse must have been spurred and hurried to deliver. How he rings the changes upon his unalterable and eternal devotion! How he implores 'his dear heart' never to forget him! and calls her 'his sweet life,' and protests that 'he welcomes the very night-breeze blowing from the castle, because it must have swept past the windows of his love!' and pours out his foolish heart like a

child pouring water into a sieve. Lady Mabel, however, seems to have been proof against sentiment, as she undoubtedly was against good looks. From all that I can gather, she appears to have made use of her adorer in furtherance of sundry political schemes, such as were so numerous at that period; and to have thrown him away, like a rusty blade, when she had no further occasion for his services. I cannot help thinking she despised him thoroughly. There are certain bills and memoranda, with his signature attached, relating to levies of men and great purchases of arms, which look as if he had plunged into some desperate enterprise, doubtless at her instigation; and in his sonnets there are frequent allusions to 'winning her by the sword,' 'loving her to the death,' and such Quixotic protestations, that look as if he had at one time meditated an unusually daring stroke. He was a fool," said Lady Scapegrace reflectively, "but he was a fine fellow, too, to throw wealth, life, and honour at the feet of a woman who was not worth a throb of that kind, generous heart—a drop of that loyal, gallant blood!

"Then he married, I can't quite make out why, as there is a considerable gap in the correspondence of the family about this time, only partially connected by the diary of an old chaplain, who seems to have been formerly tutor to Sir Montague, and to have cherished a great regard for his pupil. The lady was a foreigner and a

Romanist; and although we have no picture of her, we gather from the reverend chronicler that she was low of stature, dark-browed, and swarthy in complexion, though he gallantly adds, that she was doubtless pleasing to the eyes of those who loved such southern beauty. At the wedding it appears that Lady Mabel was present; and 'my good master's attire and ornaments,' consisting of 'peach-coloured doublet, and pearl-silken hose, and many gems of unspeakable price, dazzling to the sight of humble men,' are detailed with strange minuteness and fidelity. Even the plume in his hat and the jewelled hilt of his rapier are dwelt upon at considerable length. But notwithstanding his magnificence, the worthy chaplain did not fail to remark, that, 'my good master seemed ill at ease, and the vertigo seizing him during the ceremony, he must have fallen, had I not caught him something cunningly under the arm-pits, assisted by worthy Master Holder, and one of the groomsmen.' The chaplain, who seems to have been as blind as became his reverend character, cannot forbear from expressing his admiration of the Lady Mabel, whom he describes as 'fair and comely in colour, like the bloom of the spring rose; of a buxom stature, and of a lofty gait and gestures withal.' What was she doing at Sir Montague's wedding!—no wonder the old attack of 'vertigo,' which her elderflower wine seems rather to have increased, should have come on again.

"One thing is pretty clear, the baronet detested

his wife (the Scapegraces have generally owned that amiable weakness, my dear). I think it must have been in consequence of her religion that he became so strenuous a supporter of the opposite faith. At last he joined Monmouth, and still the correspondence seems to have gone on, for the night before Sedgmoor he wrote her a letter. Such a letter, Kate! I was lucky enough to get it from a descendant of the lady, who was under great obligations to me; I'll show it you to-morrow. No man with *that mouth* could have written such a letter, except when death was looking him in the face. I often think when she got it, she must have given way at last. But it was too late. He was killed in the first charge made by the royal troops. His own regiment, raw recruits and countrymen, turned at the first shot; but he died like a Scapegrace, waving his hat and cheering them on. We are rather proud of him in the family, after all. Compared with the rest of them, his was a harmless life and a creditable end."

"But what became of Lady Mabel?" I asked; for I confess I was a little interested in this disjointed romance of long-past days.

"Did you ever know a thoroughly unfeeling person in your life that did not prosper?" was her ladyship's reply; and again her features writhed into the Mephistopheles' sneer. "Lady Mabel married an earl, and had sons and daughters, and lived to a green old age. I have seen a picture of her at fifty, and she was still fair and comely and

buxom as when she dazzled the old chaplain's eyes and broke Sir Montague's heart; yes, yes, Kate, there's nothing like a *sensible* woman. She's the evergreen in the garden, and blooms, and buds, and puts forth fresh shoots, when the rose is lying withered and trampled into the earth; but for all that, she has never had the charm of the rose, and never can have."

Such is a specimen of one of my many conversations with Lady Scapegrace, whom I liked more and more the better I knew her. But I have been anticipating sadly during my drive of Sir Guy's coach up Sir Guy's avenue. When I reached the front door, with all my recklessness, I felt glad to see no head poking out of windows—above all, no female witness to my unwomanly conduct. I felt thoroughly ashamed of myself as I got down from the box; and I confess it was with feelings of intense relief that a polite groom of the chambers informed me, with many apologies, "her ladyship and all the ladies had gone to dress," and handed me over, with a courtly bow, to a tidy elderly woman, in a cap that could only belong to a housekeeper. She conducted me to my room, and consigned me to Gertrude, already hard at work unpacking upon her knees.

CHAPTER XX

THE SERVANTS' BALL

A VERY pretty little room it was; none of your enormous dreary state-apartments, dull as a theatre in the daytime, with a bed like a mourning coach, and corners of gloom and mystery, uncomfortable even at noon, and fatal to the nerves when seen by the light of a solitary wax-candle. On the contrary, it was quite the room for a young lady: pink hangings tinted one's complexion with that roseate bloom which the poet avers is as indispensable to woman as man's imperial front—whatever that means—is to the male biped. A dark carpet with a rich border relieved the light-coloured paper, picked out sparingly with flowers; the toilet-table was covered with a blushing transparency of pink under white, like sunset on snow—perhaps I should rather say like a muslin dress over a satin slip; and there was a charming full-length glass, in which I could contemplate my whole person from top to toe, without slanting it an inch off the perpendicular. The look-out was into Lady Scapegrace's garden, a little *bijou* of a place, that bore ample witness to the good taste of its mistress.

Every shrub had been transplanted under her own eye, every border filled according to her personal directions. She tied her own carnations, and budded her own roses, like the most exemplary clergyman's wife in England. I do believe she would have been a good wife to anybody but Sir Guy.

However, it was too dark for me to see anything of her ladyship's garden. It was already getting dusk when we arrived, and although it wanted three mortal hours of dinner, all the ladies, including the hostess, had retired to their own rooms, to while away the time by writing letters, reading novels, and going to sleep. I was much too restless to embark in any of these occupations. It would have been a relief to write, certainly—to pour out all one's thoughts and feelings before some sympathising correspondent, but I owned none such; I could not have settled to read, no, not the most interesting novel that was ever penned, although I might have left it off the day before in an agony of uncertainty at the critical place which is always to be found near the conclusion of the second volume; and as for sleep — sleep, indeed! I felt as if I should never sleep again.

When I am unhappy, and particularly when I am angry with myself, I must always be doing something — no matter what — but I *must* be occupied, so I hurried Gertrude, and bustled about, and got myself dressed, and found my own way to one of the drawing-rooms, where I hoped

to be at least secure from interruption, and to brood and worry myself for an hour or two in unbroken solitude. I ought to have been safe enough here. As I had wandered through unknown passages and passed uncertain doors, I had heard the click of billiard-balls, the sound of many voices, and the harsh laugh of Sir Guy; I knew consequently that the gentlemen were all busy at pool, or some equally intellectual pastime, and had not yet gone to dress. I was sufficiently conversant with the habits of my own sex, to be aware that no lady would willingly tarnish the freshness of her dinner toilette by coming down before the very last minute, and I anticipated therefore no further interruption than a housemaid coming to put the fire to rights, or a groom of the chambers to light fresh candles — functionaries, especially the former, who would be much more incommoded by my presence than I should be by theirs. Good gracious! there was a gentleman down and dressed already; sitting with his back to me, immersed in the thrilling pages of *The Drawing-Room Scrap Book* which he was studying upside down. I came in very softly, and he never heard me, nor turned his head, but I knew the back of that head pretty well. It was cousin John. I also took a book, and sat down.

"Perhaps," I thought, "he's not going to speak to me at all. Well, what do I care? I've a temper, too, if it comes to that."

So I read my book assiduously; it was the

Comic Almanac, but I don't know that it made me feel very much inclined to laugh. The clock ticked loud and disagreeably. I determined not to speak till I was spoken to; but after a time the silence grew irksome, and the ticking of the clock so loud, that I ventured on a slight cough, merely to break it. "Ahem," said I, still intent on the *Comic Almanac*. John turned slowly round, made a half rise, as if out of compliment to my presence, and returned to *The Drawing-Room Scrap Book*, which, however, he was now reading the right way. This would not do; I resolved to wait a little longer, just a quarter of an hour by the clock, and see whether he would not have the common civility to speak to me. What a long quarter of an hour it was! the hand reached it at last—it passed it—I gave him another five minutes. It was getting painful. I spoke, and the sound of my own voice quite startled me, yet was my remark as harmless and commonplace as well could be.

"John," said I, "what time do we dine?"

"A quarter before eight, I believe," answered John, quite good-humouredly, and as if nothing had happened to estrange us. "Dear me, Kate, how early you're dressed!"

I could have cried with vexation; but I resolved, if possible, to find a sore place somewhere, and give him "one" before I had done with him; so I made a saucy face, and asked him, half laughing, whether "he didn't think I had driven them very well from the station?"

"Inimitably, Kate," was his reply; "I hadn't the least idea you were so accomplished a charioteer."

I should have burst into tears, I verily believe, but just then Lady Scapegrace sailed in, and the usual forms of society had to be gone through; and she kissed me, and shook hands with Mr. Jones, as if she really liked us; and we talked of the weather, and the shameful stoppages of the train we had come by, and the general inconveniences of railways; and presently more ladies came down, neat and crisp as if turned out of a bandbox, followed by their lords in choking white neckcloths; and then Sir Guy himself appeared in a costume of surpassing splendour; but still, although in his evening dress, brilliant with starch and polish and buttons and jewellery, looking like a coachman in masquerade; and "dinner" was announced, and we all paired off with the utmost ceremony, and I found myself seated between Frank Lovell and dear old Mr. Lumley, and opposite the elder Miss Molasses, who scowled at me with an asperity of which I should have believed her unmeaning face incapable, as if she hated me on this particular evening more than all the other days of the year. I soon discovered the cause. Frank was more attentive to me than I had ever known him, although there was a something in his manner that I did not altogether like: a sort of freedom that I had never remarked before, and which made me colder and more reserved than usual. It was

evident he thought he might venture as far as he liked with a young lady who drove four horses, and smoked a cigar the while. I felt I was blushing *under my skin*; but I was determined to brave it all out, to hide from every living soul my own vexation and self-contempt. Once I caught a telegraphic signal exchanged between my neighbour and Miss Molasses, after which she seemed more at ease, and went on with her dinner in comfort. I was so angry now that I turned my shoulder towards Master Frank, and took refuge with my dear old friend Mr. Lumley, who, utterly regardless of the noise and flirtation his better-half was carrying on at the other end of the table, discussed his cutlet quite contentedly, and prosed away to me in his usual kind, consolatory manner. I was one of his great favourites; in fact, he told me so, then and there. He always called me "my dear," and often vowed that if he had only the use of his legs he would walk to the end of the world to make me a thorough-going naturalist like himself. I was getting more at ease under his dear old wing. I had gone through so much excitement during the day, that this comparative inaction was a positive relief, and I was really beginning to enjoy a sort of repose, when the baronet's horrid voice from the bottom of the table aroused me once more to an agony of shame and despite.

"Do me the honour to drink a glass of champagne; the champagne to Miss Coventry!" shouted Sir Guy, "you must require it after your exertion.

Egad! *my* team won't get over it in a hurry—the roads were woolly and the time short—hey, Miss Kate? But d——n me if the whipcord was scarce. I have done that seven miles in all weathers, and a sweet seven miles it is, but *I* never came anything like the pace we did to-day. Your good health, Miss Kate; I'll have a fresh team put together for you to-morrow, and a better cigar to smoke than the one I gave you to-day."

I could willingly have sunk into the earth—nay, crept under the table-cloth—anything to hide my dishonoured head. The ladies looked at each other aghast, and then at me. The gentlemen, even the stiffest of them, turned boldly round to survey such a phenomenon as the tobacco-smoking, four-in-hand Miss Coventry. Mrs. Lumley showered her long ringlets all over her face with one toss of her pretty little head, that I might not see how heartily she was laughing. Lady Scapegrace good-naturedly made an immense clatter with something that was handed to her, to distract attention from my unfortunate self; but I believe I must have got up and left the room, had not cousin John come adroitly to the rescue. He had not been studying the daily paper for nothing, and his voice rose loud and clear through the awful silence that succeeded Sir Guy's polished remarks.

"Did you see that article in to-day's *Times* about Ministers?" asked John, of the public in general; "there's another split in the Cabinet—this time it's on the malt-tax. To-day, in the City,

they were betting five to two there's a general election within a fortnight, and taking two to one Ambidexter is Premier before the first of next month."

John! John! if you had saved my life I could not have been more obliged to you. Many of the present party were members of Parliament—all were deep in politics. Most of them had seen the *Times*, but none, like John, had the earliest intelligence from the City. I have since had reason to believe he invented every syllable of it. However, such a topic was too engrossing not to swamp every other, and no more allusions were made to my unfortunate escapade till Lady Scapegrace had drawn on her gloves, bent her haughty head, and made the move, at which we all sailed away to tea and coffee in the drawing-room.

Here I was more at my ease. Lady Scapegrace and Mrs. Lumley, hating each other, were, of course, inclined to be excessively kind to me—I formed a bond of union between the foes. We three, particularly with such a weapon as the tongue of Mrs. Lumley, were more than a match for any number of our own sex, and most of the other ladies gave in at once. Only Miss Molasses held out, and eyed me once more with an expression of eager malice for which I could not easily account. I remarked, too, that she seemed restless and fidgety, glanced anxiously ever and anon at the door by which the gentlemen would join us, and seemed uncomfortable if any of us approached an empty

chair which was next to her seat. I began to have my suspicions of Frank Lovell, notwithstanding all his asseverations. I determined to watch him narrowly ; and if I found my misgivings were true —if I discovered he was false and treacherous, why, then, I would—after all, what *could* I do ? It stung me to think how powerless I was.

Now, the establishment of Scamperley, although doubtless the bonds of domestic discipline were by no means over-tightly drawn, was one in which servants, from the stately curly-headed groom of the chambers, down to the little boy in green that was always too late for the post, had more than enough upon their hands. In the first place, nobody ever seemed to think of going to bed much before daylight. This entailed a breakfast, protracted by one late sleeper after another till luncheon-time—that meal was of unusual magnificence and variety ; besides which, a hot repast, dressed by the French cook, and accompanied by iced champagne, etc., required to be served in one of the woods for the refreshment of Sir Guy's shooting guests. Then in the afternoon there were constant fresh arrivals and rooms to be got ready, for when the host and hostess were at home, they kept the house full ; and the day concluded with a large dinner-party, at which seldom less than sixteen sat down to discuss the inspirations of Monsieur Horsd'œuvre, and the priceless wines of Sir Guy. No wonder the servants looked tired and over-worked, though I fancy the luxury and

good living downstairs was quite equal to that which elicited encomiums from *bon-vivants* and connoisseurs above. Nevertheless, it was but just that they too should have their share of relaxation and amusement; therefore did Sir Guy in his generosity give an annual servants' ball, which he attended and opened himself in a state of hilarity not calculated to inspire much respect amongst his retainers. He had, however, sufficient self-command invariably to select as his partner the prettiest maid-servant in his establishment. But if the baronet failed in his dignity as head of the house, her ladyship had enough for both. She looked like a queen as she sailed in, amongst her own domestics, and all the retainers and hangers-on for miles round. On the evening in question, it amused me much to see the admiration, almost the adoration, she elicited from old and young. No wonder: that stately form, that queenly brow, had been bent over many a sickbed; those deep thrilling tones had spoken words of comfort to many a humble sufferer; that white hand was ever ready to aid, ever open to relieve; good or bad, none ever applied to Lady Scapegrace in vain.

"The virtuous it is pleasant to relieve and make friends of," she has often said to me, in her moments of confidence; "the wicked it is a duty to assist and to pity. Who should feel for them, Kate, if I didn't? God knows I have been wicked enough myself."

The men-servants never took their eyes off her,

and I fear made but sorry partners to the buxom lasses of the household, till my lady had left the room. I saw two stable-boys, evidently fresh arrivals, who seemed perfectly transfixed with admiration, as at an apparition such as they had never pictured to themselves in their dreams; and one rough fellow, a sort of under-keeper in velveteen, with the frame of a Hercules, and a fist that could have stunned an ox, having gazed at her open-mouthed for about ten minutes without winking an eyelash, struck his hand against his thigh, and exclaimed aloud, to his own inexpressible relief, though utterly unconscious of anything but the presence which so overpowered him—

"Noa, dashed if ever I *did*!"

This was soon after my lady had sailed into the servants' hall at the head of her guests. It was the custom of the place for all the fashionables and smart people who were actually in the house to attend the servants' ball, most of us only staying long enough to set the thing going with spirit, though I believe some of the young dandies who found partners to their liking remained to the end, and kept it up till daylight. Down we all went, as soon as the gentlemen had finished their wine and discussed their coffee in the drawing-room—down we went, through stone passages and long underground galleries into a splendidly-lighted apartment, somewhat devoid of furniture, but decorated with evergreens, and further adorned by a sort of muslin

transparency hanging from the roof. This was the servants' hall, and although on a stone floor, a capital room for dancing it was. We were all soon provided with partners. Sir Guy, much to her triumph, selected my maid, Gertrude. Lady Scapegrace paired off with the steward, a fat rosy man, who quite *shone* with delight at the honour. The French cook carried off Miss Molasses, with whose native stupidity I thought the vivacious foreigner seemed a little disappointed. Frank Lovell was taken possession of by the fat housekeeper, to whom he did the amiable, as Frank had the knack of doing to anything with a petticoat. Cousin John handed off a stately damsel, whom I afterwards recognised as the upper housemaid, and I was claimed by a dapper little second-horse rider, of whom I flatter myself I made a complete conquest by the interest I took in his profession, and the thorough knowledge I displayed of its details. I had to make most of the conversation myself, certainly, for his replies, though couched in terms of the deepest respect, and accompanied by a chivalrous deference for my sex, to which I was totally unaccustomed from the partners of a London ballroom, consisted for the most part of little more than "Yes, miss," and "No, miss," with an additional smooth of the smoothest, shiniest head I ever beheld. When I had exhausted the meets of the hounds for the ensuing week, with a few general observations on the pursuit of hunting, and the merits of that noble animal the horse, I began

to get high and dry for further topics, and was not sorry when three fiddles and a flute struck up their inspiriting tones, and away we all went, cross hands, down the middle and up again, to the lively, and by this time tolerably familiar, air of "Sir Roger de Coverley."

I am bound to confess that, as far as the servants were concerned, everything went on with the utmost propriety and respect. Sir Guy, indeed, pulled his partner about with an unnecessary degree of vigour, which at times almost degenerated into a romp, and squeezed my hands in "the Poussette" with an energy of affection which I could well have dispensed with; but everyone else was a very pattern of politeness and decorum. In fact, the thing was almost getting stupid, when my little second-horse rider and myself, returning breathless from our rapid excursion down some two-and-thirty couple, were brought up, startled and dismayed by a piercing scream from at least that number of female voices, all raised at the same instant.

"Fire! fire!" exclaimed the tall housemaid at my elbow.

"Save me! save me!" shrieked the fat housekeeper, plumping into Frank Lovell's arms, and well-nigh bringing him to the ground, in which case she *must* have crushed him.

"Murder! murder!" shouted my idiot of a maid, Gertrude, rushing frantically for the doorway, followed by Sir Guy, who was swearing, I am sorry to say, most fearfully.

"Stand still, fools!" I heard Lady Scapegrace exclaim in her deep tones, "and let nobody open the door!"

By this time there was a rush of all the women towards the door; and as the centre of the room was cleared, I saw what had happened. The muslin transparency had caught fire — a large fragment of it was even now blazing on the floor, and the consequences amongst all those light floating dresses and terrified women might have been indeed awful. For an instant everybody seemed paralysed — everybody but cousin John; during that instant he had flung off his coat, and kneeling upon it, extinguished the flames; they were still blazing over his head: with a desperate bound he tore down the ill-fated transparency; regardless of singed hair and blistered hands, he clasped and pressed it, and stamped upon it, and smothered it. Ere one could have counted fifty, the danger was over, and not a vestige of the fire remained. How handsome he looked with his brave face lighted up, and his eyes sparkling with excitement! Nobody could say John wanted expression of countenance now. The next moment he was quietly apologising in his usual tone to Lady Scapegrace for "spoiling her beautiful transparency," and parrying her thanks and encomiums on his courage and presence of mind, with an assurance that he only pulled it down because he happened to be directly under it; but he could not help turning to me and saying—

"Kate, I hope you were not much frightened."

The words were not much, but they were uttered in the old kind voice; they rang in my ears all the evening, and I went to bed happier than I ever thought I could have been after such a day.

CHAPTER XXI

SUNDAY AT SCAMPERLEY

THE Sunday at Scamperley, I am sorry to say, was hardly observed with that degree of respect and strictness which is due to the one sacred day of the week. Very few people went to morning service, as indeed the late hours overnight kept most of us in our rooms till eleven or twelve o'clock, when we dawdled down to a breakfast that seemed to lengthen itself out till luncheon-time. To be sure, when the latter meal had been discussed, and we had marked our reverence for the day by a conversation in which we expressed our disapproval of the personal appearance, faults and foibles, and general character of our friends, some of us would declare an intention of attending afternoon church — on which subject much discussion would arise, and the probability of the weather holding up would be volubly commented on, the church being situated about a

quarter of a mile from the house, and the way to it through the park being so completely sheltered by evergreens, that to have got wet, save in a downright pour of rain, was next to impossible. At last we would get under way, the ladies mincing along with their magnificently covered prayer-books, affecting an air of unwilling decorum; the dandies carrying cloaks, shawls, and umbrellas for their respective goddesses, and following them, so to speak, under protest, as if there was something to be ashamed of in the whole proceeding. Lady Scapegrace always went early, and quite by herself: she sat apart, too, from her guests and relatives. Not so Sir Guy. It was his great delight to create as much noise and confusion as possible, that on his entrance the respectable yeomen and humble parishioners might be dazzled with his glory, and whisper one to another, "That be Sir Guy," as he marched to the front of his family pew in a blaze of wondrous apparel. It was natural that he should create a sensation with his red face and gaudy-coloured clothes, and huge, dyed whiskers, and the eternal flower in his mouth, which was always on duty save when relieved by a cigar or a toothpick. Pew it could scarcely with propriety be called, inasmuch as it was more like a box at the opera than a seat in a place of worship. We entered by a staircase outside the church, with a private door of our own; passing through which, we found ourselves in a very comfortable chamber, with a good many chairs and sofas, a handsome

Sir Guy was charmed.

bookcase, and a blazing fire. This again led to a smaller apartment, into which Sir Guy would swagger with much unnecessary noise and bustle. Throwing up a large window, he leaned over as it were from a hustings, and, behold! we were at church.

When the sermon was concluded, Sir Guy shut the window down again, and we took our departure, much edified, as may easily be imagined, by the lessons of meekness and humility which we had received in so becoming a manner. From church we invariably proceeded to the kennel, where a stout, healthy-looking keeper paraded the baronet's pointers and setters for the inspection of the ladies. Here Sir Guy took entire possession of me once more.

"Don't be alarmed, my dear," said he, as a great bull-headed, black-and-white brute, surnamed Don, came blundering up, and tried to put his muddy paws on my dress. Sir Guy's affectation of the paternal, and his odious way of calling one "my dear," provoked me intensely; and I gave Don such a crack over his double nose with my parasol, as broke the ivory handle of that instrument, and completely quelled all further demonstrations of affection from the uninteresting brute. Sir Guy was charmed.

"Hit him hard," said he, "he's got no friends. What a vixen it is! How she punished my near leader the other day! I *love* that girl!"

The latter sentence, be it observed, was spoken

sotto voce, and required, as indeed it received, no reply.

"What interesting creatures!" exclaimed Miss Molasses, indicating an old pointer lady, who went swinging by with all the appearance of having lately brought up a large and thirsty family. "Do tell me, can that dog really catch a hare?"

The keeper's face was a study — he was apparently a humorous individual; but Miss Molasses addressed her remarks to Frank Lovell; and Frank, as in duty bound, replied. That girl was evidently making up to him, and, thinking he was fond of field-sports, pretended to take an interest in everything connected with those pursuits for his sake.

"Come and see the tame pheasants, Miss Coventry," said Sir Guy. I knew what this meant: I knew it would entail a *tête-à-tête* walk with my aversion, and I cast an imploring look at Frank, as much as to say, "*Do* save me." He caught my meaning in an instant, and skilfully interposed. Of course, as he accompanied us, so did Miss Molasses; but Frank and I lingered a little behind the rest of the party, made a wrong turn in the shrubbery, and found ourselves, I never knew exactly how, taking a long walk all alone in the waning twilight. I don't know what aunt Deborah would have said to such proceedings; and I am quite sure Lady Horsingham would have been unspeakably shocked; but these Sunday walks were the custom of the country at Scamperley

—and, after all, it was not my doing, and consequently not my fault.

I wonder why it is, that in the very convenient code of morality which the world has adopted for its private use, places and people should so completely alter facts. You may do things with impunity in London that would destroy the character of a Diana in the country; and again, certain rural practices, harmless—nay, even praiseworthy—when confined to a picturesque domain, if flourished before the eyes of the metropolis, would sink the performer to the lowest depths of social degradation. It is not what you *do* that matters one whit, but what the world *thinks* of your actions; and the gentlemen use a proverb which I have often heard in connection with certain racing enormities, that "One man may steal a horse, while another must not even look at a halter": and if this be the case with that sex who arrogate to themselves the exclusive privilege of doing wrong, how much more does the adage hold good with us poor, weak, trampled-upon women? Lady Straightlace may do what she likes: she assumes a severe air in society, is strict with her children, and harsh with her servants. In all ranks of her acquaintance (of course below that of a countess), she visits the slightest dereliction from female propriety with unrelenting bitterness. Woe be to the trespasser, high or low! The weapon is always ready to probe and gash and lacerate; the lash is constantly raised, swift to smite and never to spare. But

who would venture to speak a word against the decorum of Lady Straightlace? If she goes out in the dark, 'tis to visit a sick friend; if she encourages young Antinöus to be what ladies call continually "in her pocket," that is only in order to give the lad good advice, and keep him out of mischief. Major Ramrod is never out of the house; but what then? The visits of fifty Major Ramrods would not entitle the world to breathe a whisper against a person of such strict propriety as Lady Straightlace. But how that same forbearing world indemnifies itself on poor Mrs. Peony! It is never tired of shrugging its worldly shoulders and raising its worldly hands and eyebrows at the sayings and doings of unfortunate Mrs. Peony.

"Did you hear of her going to the bachelors' ball with three gentlemen in a fly?" (Nobody thinks it worth while to specify that the three Lotharios consisted of her grandfather, her husband, and her nephew.) "Did you see her drop her bracelet, to make young Stiffneck pick it up? Do you know that she takes morning walks with Colonel Chanticleer, and evening strolls with Bob Bulbul? She chatters, she laughs, she flirts, she makes eyes; she's bad style, she's an odious woman; 'pon my word, I don't know whether mamma will go on visiting her!"

And why should the world make this dead set at poor Mrs. Peony? She is good-looking, soft-hearted, and unaffected; she laughs when she

is pleased, and cries when she is touched. She is altogether frank, and natural, and womanly. Can these be good reasons for running her down? Heaven knows! but run down she is, just as the hypocritical Lady Straightlace is cried up. Well, we must take things as they are, and make the best of them. So Frank and I walked on through the pleasant fields in the darkening twilight, and I for one enjoyed it excessively, and was quite sorry when a great bell sounding from the house warned us that it was time to return, and that our absence would too surely be the subject of remark should we linger out of doors any longer. I never knew Frank so agreeable; on every topic he was brilliant, and lively, and amusing. Only once, in some casual remark about the future, there was a shade of melancholy in his tone, more like what he used to be formerly. Somehow, I don't think I liked him so well in his best spirits; perhaps I was myself changed in the last few weeks. I used often to think so. At first, during that walk, I feared lest Frank should touch upon a topic which would have been far from unwelcome a short time ago. I soon saw he had not the slightest intention of doing so, and I confess I was immensely relieved. I had dreaded the possibility of being obliged at last to give a decided answer—of having my own fate in my own hands, and feeling totally incapable of choosing for myself. But I might have spared my nerves all such misgivings—my cavalier never

gave me an opportunity of even fancying myself in such a dilemma till just as we reached the house, when, espying Mrs. Lumley and Miss Molasses returning from *their* stroll, he started, coloured up a little, like a guilty man, and acted as though he would have escaped their notice. I was provoked.

"Don't desert your colours, Captain Lovell," I said in a firm voice; "Miss Molasses is looking for you, even now."

"Unfeeling," muttered Frank, biting his lip, and looking really annoyed; "Oh, Miss Coventry! Oh, Kate! give me an opportunity of explaining all."

"Explain nothing," was my reply; "we understand each other perfectly. It is time for me to go in and dress."

So I marched into the house, and left him looking foolish—if Frank ever *could* look foolish—on the doorstep. As I hurried along the passages, I encountered Lady Scapegrace.

"What's the matter, Kate?" said she, following me into my room; "you look as if something had happened. No bad news, I trust, from aunt Deborah?"

I burst into tears. Kindness always overcomes me completely, and then I make a fool of myself.

"Nothing's the matter," I sobbed out, "only I'm tired and nervous, Lady Scapegrace, and I want to dress."

My hostess slipped quietly out of the room, and presently returned with some *sal volatile* and water: she made me drink it every drop.

"I must have a talk with you, Kate," said she, "but not now; the dinner-bell will ring in ten minutes;" and she, too, hurried away to perform her toilette.

As I get older, I take to moralising; and I am afraid I waste a good deal of valuable time in speculating on the thoughts, ideas, and, so to speak, the inner life of my neighbours. It is curious to observe a large well-dressed party seated at dinner, all apparently frank and open as the day, full of fun and good-humour, saying whatever comes uppermost, and to all outward seeming laying bare every crevice and cranny of their hearts, and then to reflect that each one of the throng has a separate life, entirely distinct from that which he or she parades before the public, cherished perhaps with a miser's care, or endured with a martyr's fortitude. Sir Guy, sitting at the bottom of his table, drinking rather more wine than usual—perhaps because it was Sunday, and the enforced decencies of the day had somewhat damped his spirits—looked a jovial, thoughtless, merry country gentleman, somewhat slang, it may be, not to say vulgar, but still open-hearted, joyous, and hospitable. Was there no skeleton in Sir Guy's mental cupboard? Were there no phantoms that would rise up, like Banquo's ghost, to their seat, unbidden, at his board? While he smacked his great lips over those bumpers of dark red Burgundy, had he quite forgotten the days of old—the friends he had pledged and made fools of—

the kind hearts he had loved and betrayed? Did he ever think of Damocles and the hanging sword? Could he summon courage to look into the future, or fortitude even to think of the past? Sir Guy's was a strong, healthy, sensuous nature, in which the physical far outweighed the intellectual; and yet I verily believe his conscience sometimes nearly drove him mad.

Then there was my lady, sitting at the top of her table, the very picture of a courteous, affable, well-bred hostess: perhaps, if anything, a little too placid and immovable in her outward demeanour. Who would have guessed at the wild and stormy passions that could rage beneath so calm a surface? Who would suppose that stately, reserved, majestic-looking woman had the recklessness of a brigand and the caprices of a child? A physiognomist might have marked the traces of strong feelings in her deepened eyes and the lines about her mouth—damages done by the hurricane, that years of calm can never repair; but there had been a page or two in Lady Scapegrace's life, that, with all his acuteness, would have astonished Lavater himself. Then there was Miss Molasses, the pink of propriety and "what-would-mamma-say" young ladyism—cold as a statue, and, as old Chaucer says, "upright as a bolt," but all the time over-head-and-ears in love with Frank Lovell, and ready to do anything he asked her at a moment's notice. There was Frank himself, gay and *débonnair*. Outwardly the lightest-hearted man in the

company; inwardly, I have reason to know, tormented with misgivings and stung by self-reproach. Playing a double game — attached to one woman and courting another, despising himself thoroughly the while; hemmed in by difficulties, and loaded with debt, hampered by a bad book on the Two Thousand, and playing hide-and-seek even now with the Jews, Frank's real existence was very different from the one he showed his friends. So with the rest of the party. Old Mrs. Molasses was bothered by her maid; Mr. Lumley puzzled by his beetles; his wife involved in a thousand schemes of mischief-making, which kept her in perpetual hot water: all, even honest cousin John, were sedulously hiding their real thoughts from their companions; all were playing the game with counters, of which indeed they were lavish enough; but had you asked for a bit of sterling coin, fresh from the Mint, and stamped with the impress of truth, they would have buttoned their pockets closer than ever: ay, though you had been bankrupt and penniless, they would have seen you further first, and *then they wouldn't.*

So we flirted, and talked, and laughed, and adjourned to the drawing-room, where, after a proper interval, we were joined by the gentlemen, who, in consideration of the day, consented for that one evening in the week to forego their usual games of chance or skill, such as whist, billiards, and cockamaroo. But the essential inanity of a fashionable party requires to be amused, so we sat

round a large table, and played at "letters," sedulously shuffling the handsome ivory capitals as we gave each other long jaw-breaking words, the difficulties of which were much enhanced by their being usually misspelt, but which nevertheless formed a very appropriate vehicle for what the world calls flirtation. I can always find out other people's words much quicker than my own, and whilst I was puzzling over "centipede," and teasing Mrs. Lumley, who had given it me, for the initial letter, I peeped over the shoulder of my next neighbour, Miss Molasses, and made out clearly enough the word she had just received from Frank Lovell: she would not have discovered it for a century, but I read it at a glance. I just *looked* at Frank, who blushed like a girl, took it back, vowing he had spelt it wrong, and gave her another. Did he think to throw dust in my eyes? There is a stage of mental suffering at which we grow naturally clear-sighted. I had arrived at it long ago. Watching every action of my neighbours, I had yet ears for all that was going on around. Sir Guy, occupying a position on the hearth-rug, with his coat-tails over his arms, was haranguing the clergyman of the parish, a quiet, meek little man, who dined at Scamperley regularly on Sunday, and appeared frightened out of his wits. He was a man of education and intellect, a ripe scholar, a middling preacher, and a profound logician; but he was completely overpowered by coarse, ignorant, noisy Sir Guy.

"Driving—hey?" said the baronet; "we're all fond of driving, here, Mr. Waxy: there's a young lady who will teach you to handle the ribbons. Gad, she'd make the crop-eared mare step along. Have you got the old mare, still? Devilish good old mare!"

No child of man is too learned, or too quiet, or too humble, to feel flattered at praise of his horse. Mr. Waxy blushed a moist yellow as he replied—

"Very good of you to remember her, Sir Guy—docile and safe, and gentle withal, Sir Guy; but I don't drive her myself, Sir Guy," added Mr. Waxy, raising his hands deprecatingly—as who should say, "Heaven forbid!" "I don't drive myself, sir; no—no—my lad assumes the reins; and notwithstanding the potency of your Scamperley ale, Sir Guy, we manage to arrive pretty safe at our destination."

"Quite right, Mr. Waxy," vociferated Sir Guy. "Did I ever tell you what happened to *me* once, when I took it into my head to drive my own chariot home? Look ye here, sir, I'll tell ye how it was. I was unmarried then, Mr. Waxy, and as innocent as a babe, d'ye see? Well, sir, I'd been to a *battue* at my friend Rocketer's; and what with staying to dinner, and a ball and a supper afterwards, it was very late before I started for Scamperley, and all the servants were drunk, as a matter of course. Why, sir, when I came out of the house, there were my carriage and horses standing in the line with some dozen others, and devil

a soul to look after 'em. What should you have done, Mr. Waxy? Sworn like a trooper, I'll warrant it!"

Mr. Waxy shook his head with an air of mild deprecation.

"Well, sir," continued Sir Guy, "I'll tell you what I did. I jumped on the box, sir, before you could say Jack Robinson. I put on my own coachman's box-coat, sir, and drove 'em home myself. Thinks I, 'I'll give the rascals a precious benefit; they'll have to walk every mile of the way'—nine miles, and as dark as pitch, Mr. Waxy—as dark as pitch! Well, sir, I had a London footman, who was a sharpish fellow, and used to dissipation in general; he heard the carriage drive off, and ran to catch it. I gave him a pretty good breather as I rattled down the avenue. The fellow puffed like a grampus when he got up behind, making no doubt it was all right, and he hadn't been found out. The horses knew they were going home, and it wasn't long before I pulled up at my own door. Down gets John, all officiousness and alacrity to make up for past enormities, and rings a peal that might waken the dead. Directly he hears them beginning to unbar, he opens the carriage-door, and looks in — no master! The day was just dawning. I shall never forget the fellow's face as he looked up, mistaking me, muffled as I was in my own livery, for his fellow-servant.

"'I always told you how it would be, Peter,' said he, turning up a face of drunken wisdom; 'and now

it's come to pass : the devil's been and took Sir Guy at last ; and if he's as wicious there as he's been here, it's a precious bad bargain for both of 'em ! ' "

Poor Mr. Waxy was obliged to laugh, but he took his departure immediately ; and of course, directly there was a move, the ladies went to bed.

" Come to my room, Kate," whispered Lady Scapegrace, as we lighted our hand-candles ; " you can go the short way through the boudoir : I want to speak a word with you."

CHAPTER XXII

TOUCH AND GO

"KATE," said Lady Scapegrace, as she shut the door of her snug dressing-room, and wheeled an easy-chair before the fire for my benefit—"Kate, you're a foolish girl; it strikes me you are playing a dangerous game, and playing it all wrong, moreover. I can see more than you think. Do you know the difference between real diamonds and paste? Not you, you little goose. But you shall, if I can teach it you. Kate, have you ever heard me talked about? Did you ever hear any good of me?"

I was forced to answer both questions—the former in the affirmative, the latter in the negative.

"Do you believe I'm as bad as they give me credit for?" proceeded her ladyship.

"No, no!" I replied, taking her hand and kissing it; for I really liked Lady Scapegrace. "Let them say what they will, I won't believe anything bad of you at all."

"I have had a strange life, Kate," said she; "and perhaps not quite fair play. Well, the worst is over now, at anyrate. I don't *much* care how

short the remainder may be. Kate, did you ever hear I was a murderess?"

"No, no!" I repeated, taking her hand once more; for I was shocked and half frightened at the expression of her countenance. "I never heard anybody say more than that you were odd, and a flirt, and perhaps not very much attached to Sir Guy."

Lady Scapegrace shuddered. "I owe you a great deal, Kate Coventry," she resumed—"a great deal more than I can ever hope to repay. I consider that you once saved my life, but of that I make small account; you have done me a far greater kindness—you have interested me; you have made me fond of you; you have taught me to feel like a woman again. The least I can do in return is to watch you and warn you—to show you the rock on which I made shipwreck, and beseech you to avoid it. Kate, you've heard of my cousin Latimer; would you like to see his picture?"

Lady Scapegrace rose, walked to a small cabinet, unlocked it, and produced a miniature, which she placed in my hands. If the painter had not flattered him, cousin Latimer was indeed a handsome boy. There was genius on his wide, bold forehead, and resolution in his firm, well-cut mouth; his large dark eyes betrayed strong passions and keen intelligence, whilst high birth was stamped on his fine features and chivalrous expression of countenance. Poor cousin Latimer!

"Look at that, Kate," said Lady Scapegrace,

in low chilling tones; "the last time I saw him, that was his very image. Thank God, I never beheld him when those kind features were cold and rigid—that white neck gashed by his own hand! Oh, Kate! 'tis a sad story. I have not mentioned it for twenty years; but it's a relief to talk of it now. Surely I was not altogether to blame; surely he might have given me time; he need not have been so hasty—so desperate.

"Listen, Kate. I was one of a large family of girls. All my sisters were beautiful; all were vain of their charms. As I grew up, I heard nothing talked about but conquests, and lovers, and captivation. I thought, to dazzle and enslave the opposite sex was the noblest aim of woman. Latimer was brought up with us: we called him 'cousin,' though he was in reality a very distant connection. Poor boy! day by day I could see he was growing more and more attached to me. Latimer always brought me the earliest roses. Latimer would walk miles by the side of my pony. Latimer helped me with my drawing, and did my commissions, and turned the leaves when I played on the pianoforte, and hung over the instrument when I sang. In short, Latimer was my slave, body and soul; and the consequence was, Kate, that I cared very little for him. My sisters, to be sure, joked me about my conquest; and I felt, I confess, a proper pride in owning a lover, like the rest; but of real affection for him I had then very little: and I often think, my dear, that we women seldom

value devotion such as his till too late. I was not old enough to think seriously of marriage; but Latimer was convinced I should become his wife, and (poor fellow!) made all his arrangements and schemes for the future under this idea, with a forethought scarcely to be expected from one so young.

"Well, years crept on, and I came out, as you young ladies call it, and was presented at court, and went to balls, and began to make the most of my time, and enjoy life after the manner of my kind. Of course, I was no wiser than my elders. I danced, and smiled, and flirted, as I had seen my sisters do; and the more partners I could refuse, the better I was pleased. One day cousin Latimer came to me, and spoke out honestly and explicitly. He told me of all his hopes, his misgivings, his future as I had the power to make it, and his love. I was pleased and flattered. I felt that I liked cousin Latimer better than anyone in the world; but there were two things I liked even better than cousin Latimer: these were power and admiration. Of the former I never could obtain as much as I coveted; of the latter I determined to take my fill. We were that night to have a grand ball in the house, and were much occupied with decorating the rooms, and other preparations, such as we girls delighted in. I put off Latimer with half-promises and vague assurances, which sent him away more in love with me than ever. I was to dance the first quadrille with him. It was an engagement of

at least a month's standing, and he had rather wearied me by too often reminding me of it.

"There was a regiment of hussars quartered in our neighbourhood, and we were well acquainted with most of the officers. The more so, as one of my sisters was engaged to be married to the major, who, by the way, ran away from her a year afterwards. One of these officers, a captain in the regiment, was an especial flirt of mine; he was a good-looking, agreeable man, and a beautiful waltzer. I recollect the night as well as if it was yesterday; the officers arriving in their uniforms—my father standing behind us, proclaiming aloud his pride in his six handsome daughters—cousin Latimer claiming my hand for the first dance, and my refusal, notwithstanding my long promise, on the plea that I was engaged to Captain Normanton. Poor boy! I can see his pained, eager face now. 'You do what you like with me,' he said; 'but you *must* dance the next.' I laughed and promised.

"Captain Normanton was very agreeable; he was the most dashing-looking man in the room, and I liked the vanity of parading him about in his uniform, and showing my sisters and others the power I had over cousin Latimer. Once more the latter claimed my promise, and once more I threw him over. I glanced triumphantly at him as he watched me from a corner; and the more he gazed, the more *I acted at him*, as if I was making violent love to my partner. Somehow, without looking, I

saw every shade of Latimer's countenance. Once or twice I had compassion, but there was the excitement of vanity and novelty to lure me on.

"For the first time in my life, I knew how much it was possible for men to care for us; and I could not resist torturing my victim to the utmost. Fool that I was! Cousin Latimer came up to me once more. Though annoyed and hurt, he mustered a good-humoured smile as he said, 'For the third and *last* time, will you dance with me?' 'But you don't waltz half as well as Captain Normanton,' I replied; 'I like *him* best;' and away I whirled again with the delighted hussar.

"The instant I had spoken, I felt I had gone too far. I would have given anything to unsay those foolish words, but it was too late. When I stopped, panting and breathless, after the dance, cousin Latimer came quite close to me. I never saw a face so changed: he was deadly pale, and there was a sweet, melancholy expression in his countenance that contrasted strangely with the wild gleam in his eye. He spoke very low, almost softly, but in a voice I had never heard before. He only said, 'God forgive you, dear!—you try me too much.' I never saw him again, Kate—never.

"When I heard what had happened, I was laid up for months with brain fever; they cut all my hair off; they pinioned me; they did all that skill and science could do, and I recovered. Would to God that I had died! I do not think my head has ever been right since.

"Kate! Kate! would you have such feelings as mine? Should you like to live all your life haunted by one pale face? Would you wish never to enjoy a strain of music, a gleam of sunshine, a single, simple, natural pleasure, because of the phantom? Be warned, my dear, before it is too late. I tell you honestly, I never forgot him; I tell you, I never forgave myself. What did I care for any of them, except poor Alphonse—and I only liked Alphonse because he reminded me of the dead. Do you think I was not a reckless woman when I married Sir Guy? Do you think I have not been punished and humiliated enough? Heaven forbid, my dear, that your fate should resemble mine! I read your feelings far more plainly than you do yourself. You have a kind, generous, noble heart deeply attached to you; don't be a fool, as I was; don't throw him over for the sake of an empty-headed, flirting, good-for-nothing *roué*, who will forget you in a fortnight. Strong language, Kate, is it not? But think over what I have told you. Good-night, dear. What would I give to yawn as honestly as you do, and to sleep sound once again, as I used to sleep when I was a girl!"

I took my candle, and kissed Lady Scapegrace affectionately as I thanked her, and wished her good-night. It was already late, and my room was quite at the other end of the house. As I sped along, devoutly trusting I should not meet any of the gentlemen on their way to bed, I spied a figure

advancing towards me from the end of a long corridor. It was attired in a flowing dressing-gown of crimson silk, with magnificent Turkish slippers, and carried a hand-candlestick much off the perpendicular, as it swayed up the passage in a somewhat devious course. When it caught sight of me, it extended both its arms, regardless of the melted wax with which such a manœuvre bedaubed the wall, and prepared, with many endearing and complimentary expressions, to bar my further progress.

The figure was no less a person than Sir Guy, half tipsy, proceeding from his dressing-room to bed. What to do I knew not. I shuddered at the idea of meeting the baronet at such an hour, and in so excited a state. I loathed and hated him at all times, and I quite trembled now to face his odious compliments and impertinent *double entendres*. My hunting experience, however, had given me a quick eye to see my way out of a difficulty; and espying a green baize door on my right I rushed through it, and down a flight of stone steps that led I knew not where. Giving a view-holloa that must have startled every light sleeper in the house, Sir Guy followed close in my wake, dropping the silver candlestick with a most alarming clatter. I saw I had not the speed of him to any great extent, so I dodged into the first empty room I came to, and blowing out my light, resolved to lie there *perdue* till my pursuer had overrun the scent.

The manœuvre answered admirably so far. I

heard the enemy swearing volubly as he blundered along the passage, thinking I was still before him ; and I now prepared to grope my way back in the dark to my own room. But I had not escaped yet. To my infinite dismay, I heard the voices of gentlemen wishing each other the usual "Good-night, old fellow," and proceeding along the passage from the direction of the smoking-room. Horror of horrors! a light approached the door of the very room in which I had taken refuge ; in another second he would enter—the man would find me in his room. He stopped a moment on the threshold to fire a parting jest at his companions, and the light from his candle showed me my only chance. A covered shower-bath stood in the corner of the apartment, and into that shower-bath I jumped, closing the curtains all round me, but, as may be easily believed, taking very particular care not to pull the string. Scarcely was I fairly ensconced before Frank Lovell made his appearance ; and I saw at once, through a hole in the curtains, that he was the lawful occupier and possessor of the apartment.

Here was a predicament indeed! If the emergency had not been so desperate, I must have fainted. "Good gracious," I thought, "if he should lock the door!" Frank, however, seemed to have no such intention ; I believe this is a precaution gentlemen seldom adopt. On the contrary, he proceeded to make himself thoroughly at home. Lighting his candle, he leisurely

divested himself of his coat, waistcoat, and neckcloth, enfolded his person in a large loose dressing-gown, leaned his head on both hands, and gave a deep sigh. Apparently much relieved by this process, he took up his hair-brushes, and after a good refreshing turn at his locks and whiskers, and a muttered compliment to his own reflection in the glass, that sounded very like "You fool!" he unlocked a small writing-case, and producing from it a little bundle of letters, tied up with pink ribbon, selected them one by one, and read them over from beginning to end, kissing each with devout fervour as he replaced it carefully in its envelope. I would have given a great deal to know who they were from; their perusal seemed to afford him mingled satisfaction and annoyance; but he sighed heavily again, and I saw he had a long lock of hair in his fingers, which he gazed at till the tears stood in his eyes. He kissed it, the traitor! and fondled it, and spoke to it, and clasped it to his heart (men are just as great fools as we are). Whose could it be? Not mine, certainly, for I never gave him such a thing. Miss Molasses'? No; hers was black, and rather coarse; this was a silky chestnut. Could it have belonged to Mrs. Lumley? Hers was very much the colour, and I often thought Frank rather *épris* with her. Nonsense! that lively lady had not an atom of sentiment in her composition; she would just as soon have thought of working him a counterpane!

I was so interested in my discoveries, that I

forgot altogether my own critical position, the impracticability of escape till Frank had gone to sleep, the chance of arousing him as I went out, or, more alarming still, the awful possibility of his lying awake all night. When morning dawned, concealment could no longer be preserved, and what to do then? I meditated a bold stroke—to rush from my hiding-place, blow out both the candles before my host had recovered his surprise, and then run for it. Thrice was I on the eve of this perilous enterprise. Thrice my courage failed me at the critical moment. The fourth time I think I should have gone, when a knock at the door arrested my attention, and Frank's "Come in" welcomed a visitor whose voice I well knew to be that of cousin John. The plot began to thicken. It was impossible to get away now.

"Lovell," said John, in an unusually grave voice, "I told you I wanted to speak a word with you, and this is the only time I can make sure of finding you alone."

Frank was busy huddling his treasures back into the writing-case.

"Drive on, old fellow," said he, "there's lots of time; it's not two o'clock yet."

"Lovell," proceeded John, "you are an old friend of mine, and I have a great regard for you, but I have a duty to perform, and I must go through with it. Point-blank, on your honour as a gentleman, I ask you, are you or are you not engaged to be married to Miss Molasses?"

Frank coloured, hesitated, looked confused, and then got angry.

"No intimacy can give you a right to ask such a question," he replied, talking very fast and excitedly; "you take an unwarrantable liberty, both with her and me. Who told you I was going to be married at all? or what business is it of yours whether I am married or not?"

John began to get heated too, but he looked very determined.

"I am sorry you should take it thus," he replied, "for you force me to come at once to the point. As the nearest relation and natural guardian of my cousin, Miss Coventry, I must ask your intention with regard to that young lady. I have often remarked you paid her great attention, but it was not till to-day that I heard your name coupled with hers, and a doubt expressed as to which of the ladies I have mentioned you meant to honour with your preference. I don't want to quarrel with you, Frank," added John, softening, "I don't want to mistrust your good feelings or your honour. Perhaps you don't know her as well as I do; perhaps you can't appreciate her value like me. Many men would give away their lives for her—would think no sacrifice too dear at which to purchase her regard. Believe me, Frank, she's worth anything. If you have proposed to her, as I have reason to think you must have done, confide in me; I will smooth all difficulties; I will arrange everything for you both. God knows I

love her better than anything on earth; but her happiness is my first consideration, and if she likes you, Frank, she shall marry you."

Captain Lovell seemed to be of a different opinion. He bit his lip, looking angry and annoyed.

"You go too fast, Mr. Jones," he replied, very stiffly; "I have never given the young lady you mention an opportunity of either accepting or refusing me. If ever *I am* fool enough to marry I shall take the liberty of selecting my own wife, without consulting your taste; and I really cannot undertake to wed every lively young lady that condescends to flirt with me, merely *pour passer le temps*."

John's face grew dark with anger. How noble he looked as he squared his fine figure and reared his gallant head, standing erect before his enemy, and scanning him from top to toe. He was very quiet too; he only said—

"Captain Lovell, I claim a brother's right to protect Miss Coventry's reputation, and as a brother I demand reparation for the wrong you have done her; need I say any more?"

"Not another syllable," replied Frank Lovell carelessly. "Whenever you like, only the sooner the better. Popham always acts for me on these occasions; he don't go away till to-morrow afternoon, so I refer you to him. I'm getting sleepy now, Mr. Jones. I wish you a good-night."

Cousin John took up his candle, and retired. Never in my life had I been in such a position as this. That there would be a duel, I had not the slightest shadow of doubt—and all for my sake. That my gallant, generous, true-hearted cousin should have behaved so nobly, so unselfishly, did not surprise me; but that he should be sacrificed to his devoted fidelity—I could not bear to think of it for a moment! How I loved him now! How I wondered that I could ever have compared the two for an instant! How I resolved to make him full amends, and, come what might, to frustrate this projected duel! But what could I do? In the first place, how was I to get out of the room?

My situation was so embarrassing, and at the same time so ridiculous, that I could with difficulty resist an hysterical inclination to laugh. Here I was, at all events, a close prisoner till Captain Lovell should go to bed, and he seemed to have no idea of that rational proceeding, though it was now past three o'clock. He walked about the room, whistling softly. Once he came so near my hiding-place that I felt his breath on my cheek.

"Good Heavens," thought I, "if he should take it into his head to have a shower-bath now to brace his nerves!"

At last he walked to a drawer, selected a cigar, lit it, and throwing open the window, proceeded deliberately to get out. I almost hoped he would break his neck! But I conclude there was a ledge or balcony of some sort to sustain him, and that he

was accustomed to a nightly cigar in that position. Here was a chance not to be lost! I bolted out of the shower-bath; I popped the extinguisher on one candle, and blew the other out at the same instant. I heard the smoker's exclamation of astonishment, but heeded it not. I rushed through the door. I flew along the dark passages, breathless and trembling; at last I reached my own room, more by instinct, I believe, than any other faculty, and having locked the door and struck a light, sat me down, in a state of immense confusion and bewilderment, to think what I should do next.

CHAPTER XXIII

EXCURSIONS AND ALARUMS

WHO was there to whom I could apply? Sir Guy, of course, was out of the question. Then, in an affair of such delicacy, I could not consult a *young* man; besides, these boys, I fancy, are always for fighting, right or wrong. A woman was no use, or I should have gone straight back to Lady Scapegrace. I pondered matters over and over again. I thought of every horror in the way of duelling I had ever heard of. My own uncle was shot dead by a Frenchman, when attached to the army of occupation at Cambray. It was a romantic story, and I had often heard the particulars from my godfather, General Grape, who officiated as his second. My uncle was a handsome, chivalrous youth, deeply attached to a countrywoman of his own, whose picture he wore constantly next his heart. Such a man was not likely to become compromised with another lady. It happened, however, that my uncle was quartered in the vicinity of a château belonging to a retired general of the Grand Army, who hated an Englishman as a matter of taste, and a British officer as

a matter of duty. The French general had a charming daughter, and Rosalie, besides being *belle comme le jour*, was likewise what her acquaintance called *tant soit peu coquette*. So she made love to my uncle on every available opportunity, and of course, because he didn't care for her two pins, set her faithless heart upon him, as a woman will. To make things simpler, she was herself engaged to a young marquis in the neighbourhood. Well, my uncle, like a sensible man, did his best to keep clear of the whole thing, but he could not avoid meeting Rosalie occasionally in his walks, nor could he absolutely refuse to make her acquaintance, or refrain from perusing the letters she wrote to him, or, finally, prevent that forward young person from falling into his arms, and bursting into tears, with her head on his shoulder. The moment was, however, ill-chosen for so dramatic a scene, inasmuch as it occurred under the very noses of her father and her *fiancé*, both of whom, unknown to the fair wanderer, had followed Rosalie, on purpose to find out where it was she walked day after day so perseveringly.

My uncle had scarcely recovered his surprise at the first demonstration, ere he was staggered by the second. — *Malheureuse!* exclaimed the father; — *Perfide!* groaned the lover; — *Traitre!* shouted the marquis; —*Lâche!* growled the general. My uncle turned from one to the other, completely at a nonplus, Rosalie in the meantime clinging to his breast and imploring him passionately to save

her! My uncle's waistcoat came undone—his real mistress's miniature dropped out; the sight added fuel to the fire of the belligerents. Nothing would satisfy them but his blood. In vain he protested, in vain he swore, in extremely bad French, that he had no *penchant* for Rosalie, had never made love to her in his life; in fact, rather disliked her than otherwise. The Frenchmen *sacréed*, and fumed, and stormed at him, and jostled him, till my uncle lost all patience, shook himself clear of Rosalie, who fell fainting to the ground, knocked each of his adversaries down in turn, and walked home to his quarters, very much disgusted with the world in general, and the wilfulness of French young ladies in particular. Of course he knew perfectly well it was not to end here. He sent for Grape, then a brother subaltern, and placed his honour in that officer's hands.

No message came for two days, that interval having elapsed in consequence of a deadly quarrel between the marquis and the general as to who should take the thing up first. Grape firmly believes they decided the matter with small swords; another version is, that they played piquet for eight-and-forty hours to settle it—the best out of so many games. Be this how it may, the general appeared as the ostensible champion, and the marquis officiated as his *témoin*. Grape, as my uncle's second, chose pistols for the weapons, and selected a retired piece of ground in a large garden near the château as the lists. I give the conclusion in his own words :—

"Horsingham was as cool as a cucumber, and the only thing that seemed to annoy him was a possibility that the cause of his *rencontre* might be misrepresented to her he loved at home.

"'Tell her I was faithful to the last,' said he to me, as he squeezed my hand just before *I put him up*. 'Tell her, if I fall, that I never loved another; that my heart is pure and spotless as that white rose, which I will wear upon it for her sake.'

"While he spoke, he plucked a white rose from a neighbouring bush, and, in spite of my remonstrances, fixed it in the breast of his close-fitting dark coat.

"'What are you about, Charlie?' I urged. 'This is no time for romance; don't you know all these cursed Frenchmen are dead shots? You might as well chalk out a bull's-eye over the pit of your stomach!'

"He was a romantic, foolish fellow. I can see him now, drawing himself up, and looking like a knight of the olden time, with his brightening eye, and his smooth unruffled forehead.

"'Give her the white rose,' he only said. 'She'll keep it when it's withered, perhaps. And tell her I never wavered—never for an hour!'

"I knew too well how it would be. From the instant he came on the ground, the old general never took his eye off his man. What an eye it was! Cold and grey and leaden; half shut, like that of some wild animal, with a pupil that contracted visibly while I watched it. I knew my friend had no chance. I did all I could. As I had the privilege of placing the men, I stationed our adversary where he would have to look over his shoulder to see my signal, whilst my friend's face was turned towards me. They were to fire when I dropped my hat. I dropped it with a flourish. Alas! all was of no use. The general shot him right through the heart—I knew he would; and the bullet cut the stalk of the rose in two, smashed the lower part of the miniature, leaving only the face untouched, and poor Charlie Horsingham never spoke again. As we lifted him, and unbuttoned his waistcoat, the two Frenchmen gazed at the miniature with looks of anger and curiosity. Great was their astonishment to behold the portrait of another than Rosalie. The younger man was much affected; he groaned aloud, and covered his face with his hands. Not so the old general—'*Tenez*,' said he, wiping the barrel of his weapon on his glove, '*c'est dommage! je ne contais pas là-dessus; mais, que voulez-vous? Peste! ce n'est qu'un Anglais de moins.*'"

This is the carelessness with which men talk and think of human life; and here was my cousin about to go through the fearful ordeal, perhaps to be shot dead, like poor Charles Horsingham. The more I thought of it, the more resolutely I determined to prevent it. I had never taken off my dinner-dress—my candles were nearly burned down—the clock struck five—in two hours it would be daylight. There was not a moment to lose. All at once a bright thought struck me. I would rouse good old Mr. Lumley. He was clever, sensible, and respected; he was likewise a man of honour and a gentleman. With all his infirmities, I had seen him show energy enough when he could do any good. I would go to him at once; and I left my room with the resolution that I, for one, would move heaven and earth ere a hair of cousin John's precious head should be imperilled on my account. I lit my candle, and tripped once more along the silent passages. I knew where Mrs. Lumley slept, and soon reached the door of her room: audible snores, bass and treble, attested, if not the good consciences, at least the sound digestions, of the inmates. I tapped loudly, no answer. Again I knocked till my knuckles smarted. A sleepy "Come in" was the reply to my summons. They probably thought it was the housemaid arrived to open the shutters. It was no time for false delicacy or diffidence, and I walked boldly into the apartment. By the light of the night-

lamp I beheld the happy pair. Of course, I am not going to describe the lady's dress; but all I can say is, that if ever I am prevailed on to marry, and such a catastrophe is by no means impossible, I shall *not* permit my husband to disfigure himself at any hour by adopting such a costume as that of dear, kind, good old Mr. Lumley. A white cotton nightcap, coming well over the ears, and tied under the throat with tape to match, surmounted by a high *bonnet rouge* like an extinguisher, the entire head-dress being further secured by a broad black ribbon, would make Plato himself look ridiculous; and a sleepy old face, with a small turn-up nose, and a rough stubbly chin of unshaven grey, does not add to the beauty or the dignity of such a recumbent subject. However, what I wanted was Mr. Lumley; and Mr. Lumley I was forced to take as I could get him.

"What's o'clock?" he murmured drowsily. "Come again to light the fire in half an hour."

"Why, it's Kate!" exclaimed his better-half, rousing up, bright and warm, in a moment, like a child. "Goodness! Kate, what are you doing here?"

"Miss Coventry!" ejaculated her husband. "What is it? A perfect specimen of the common house-spider, I'll lay my life. What an energetic girl!—found it on her pillow, and lost not a moment in bringing it here. I'm eternally obliged to you. Where is it?—Mind you don't injure

the legs!—Pray don't stick a pin through the back!"

"Oh, Mr. Lumley!" I sobbed out, "it's worse than a spider. Get up, please; there's going to be a duel, and I want you to stop it. Captain Lovell and cousin—cousin"—

I fairly broke down here, and burst into tears; but the kind old man understood me in an instant.

"Margery, my dear," he shouted, "get me up directly—there's not a moment to lose. Oh, these boys! these boys! young blood and absence of brains! If they would but devote their energies to science—don't distress yourself, my dear; I'll manage it all. Where does Captain Lovell sleep?"

"First door on the right, when you get down the steps in the Bachelors' wing," I replied, unhesitatingly, much to the surprise of Mrs. Lumley. She would have known too, if she had been shut up there for a couple of hours in a shower-bath.

"I'll go to him as soon as I'm dressed," promised Mr. Lumley. "I pledge you my honour he shan't fight till I give him leave. Go to bed, my dear, and leave everything in my hands. Don't cry, there's a good girl. By the way, the housemaids here are so infernally officious—you haven't seen a good specimen of the common house-spider anywhere about, have you?"

I assured the kind-hearted old naturalist I had not; and as he was already half out of bed, I took my departure, and sought my own couch—not to sleep, Heaven knows, but to toss and turn and

tumble, and see horrid visions, waking as I was, and think of everything dreadful that might happen to my cousin, and confess to my own heart how I loved him now, and hated myself for having treated him as I had, and revel, as it were, in self-reproach and self-torture. It was broad daylight ere I fell into a sort of fitful doze, so outwearied and over-excited was I, both in body and mind.

CHAPTER XXIV

COUSIN JOHN

IT is very disagreeable to face a large party with anything on your mind that you cannot help thinking must be known, or at least suspected, by your associates. When I came down to breakfast, after a hasty and uncomfortable toilette, and found the greater portion of the guests assembled at that gossiping meal, I could not help fancying that every listless dandy and affected fine lady present was acquainted with my proceedings during the last twelve hours, and was laughing in his or her sleeve accordingly. I cast a rapid and frightened glance round the table; and, to my infinite relief, beheld cousin John eating his egg as composedly as possible; whilst a reassuring smile and pleasant "good-morning" from Mr. Lumley gave me to understand that his mediation had averted all fatal proceedings. The other guests ate and drank, and laughed and chattered

much as usual; but still I could not help remarking on the face of each of them a subdued expression of intelligence, as though in possession of some charming bit of news or delightful morsel of scandal. Lady Scapegrace was the first to put me on a footing of equality with the rest.

"We have lost some of our party, Kate," said she, as she handed me my tea. "I confess I suspected it last year, in London. She is a most amiable girl, and will have a large fortune."

I looked at her ladyship as if I was dreaming.

"You needn't be so surprised, Kate," said she, laughing at my utter bewilderment; "don't you miss anybody? Look round the table."

Sure enough the Molasses party were absent, and there was no Frank Lovell. Then it was true, after all! He had sold himself to that lackadaisical young lady, and had been making a fool of *me*—Kate Coventry—the whole time. How angry I ought to have been! I was surprised to find I was not. On the contrary, my first feeling was one of inexpressible relief, as I thought there was now no earthly obstacle between myself and that kind face on the other side of the breakfast-table; though too soon a horrid tide of doubts and fears surged up, as I reflected on my own unworthiness and caprice. How I had undervalued that noble, generous character! How often I had wounded and annoyed him in sheer carelessness or petulance, and thought little of inflicting on him days of pain to afford myself the short

and doubtful amusement of an hour's flirtation and folly! What if he should cast me off now? What if he had obtained an insight into my character, which had cured him entirely of any regard he might previously have entertained for me? What if I should find that I had all my life been neglecting the gem which I was too ignorant to appreciate; and now, when I knew its real value, and would give my life for it, it was beyond my grasp? At all events, I would never forget him. Come what might now, I would never care for another. I felt quite glad Frank Lovell was as good as married, and out of the way. The instant I had swallowed my breakfast, I put my bonnet on and rushed into the garden, for I felt as if fresh air was indispensable to my very existence. The first person I met amongst the flower-beds was dear old Mr. Lumley. He had hobbled out on his crutches purposely to give me an interview. I thanked him, as if he had been my father, for all his kindness; and he talked to me gently and considerately, as a parent would to a child.

"I promised you, my dear, that they should not fight, and I think I have kept my word. Your cousin, Miss Coventry, is a noble fellow," said the old man, his benevolent features kindling into admiration; "but I had more difficulty with him than his antagonist. He would not be satisfied till Captain Lovell had assured him, on his honour, that you had yourself declined his advances in a manner which admitted of no misconstruction;

and that then, and not till then, he considered himself free. You were right, my dear—I am an old man, and I take a great interest in you, so do not think me impertinent—you were right to have nothing to say to a *roué* and a gambler. I was not always the old cripple you are so forbearing with now. I lived in the world once, and saw a good deal of life and men. My experience has convinced me that selfishness is the bane of the generality of mankind; but that nowhere is it so thoroughly developed as in those who live, by what people call their wits, and enjoy all the luxuries and pleasures of life by dint of imposing on the world. I consider Frank Lovell, though we all vote him such a good fellow, one of that class; and I do not think he would have made a good husband to my young friend, Miss Coventry. Your cousin, my dear, is a character of another stamp altogether; and if, as I hear everybody say, he is really to be married to that Welsh girl, I think you will agree with me that she has got a prize such as falls to the lot of few."

Mr. Lumley was by this time out of breath; but I could not have answered him to save my life. Like one of his own favourite house-spiders, I had been unconsciously spinning a web of delightful self-delusion, and here came the ruthless housemaid and swept it all away. How blind I must have been not to see it long ago! John might be very fond of pheasant-shooting, and I believe,

when the game is plentiful and the thing well managed, that sport is fascinating enough; but people don't travel night and day into such a country as Wales, where there are no railroads, merely for the purpose of standing in a ride and knocking over a certain quantity of half-tame fowls. No, no; I ought to have seen it long ago; I had lost him now, and I knew his value when it was too late.

Too late!—the knell that tolls over half the hopes and half the visions of life. Too late!—the one bitter drop that poisons the whole cup of success. Too late! The golden fruit has long hung temptingly just above your grasp; you have laboured and striven, and persevered, and you seize it at last and press it to your thirsty lips. Dust and ashes are your reward; the fruit is still the same, but it is too late; your desire for it is gone, or your power of enjoying it has failed you at the very moment of fruition; all that remains to you is the keen pang of disappointment, or, worse still, the apathy of disgust. I might have made John my slave a few weeks ago, and *now*—it was too provoking, and for that Welsh girl, too! How I hated everything Welsh! not ancient Pistol, eating his enforced leek with its accompanying sauce, could have entertained a greater aversion for the Principality than I did at that moment.

Presently we were joined by Lady Scapegrace. She, too, had got something pleasant to say to me.

"I told you so, Kate," she observed, taking my

arm, and leading me down one of those secluded walks,—"I told you so, all along. Your friend, Captain Lovell, proposed to Miss Molasses yesterday. Don't blame him too much, Kate; if he's not married within three weeks, he'll be in the Bench—never mind how I know, but I do know. I think he has behaved infamously to you, I confess; but take comfort, my dear, you are not the first by a good many."

I put it to my impartial reader whether such a remark, though made with the kindest intentions, was not enough to drive any woman mad with spite. I broke away from Lady Scapegrace and rushed back into the house. We were to leave Scamperley that day by the afternoon train. Gertrude was already packing my things; but I was obliged to go to the drawing-room for some work I had left there, and in the drawing-room I found a whole bevy of ladies assembled over their different occupations. Women never spare each other; and I had to go through the ordeal, administered ruthlessly, and with a refinement of cruelty known only to ourselves. Even Mrs. Lumley, my own familiar friend, had no mercy.

"We ought to congratulate you, I conclude, Miss Coventry," said one.

"He's a relation of yours, is he not?" inquired another.

"Only a very great friend," laughed Mrs. Lumley, shaking her curls.

"It's a great marriage for him," someone else

went on to say; "far better than he deserves. Poor thing! he'll lead her a sad life: he's a shocking flirt!"

Now, if there is one thing to my mind more contemptible than another, it is that male impostor whom ladies so charitably designate by the mild term a flirt. It is all fair for *us* to have our little harmless vanities and weaknesses. We are shamefully debarred from the nobler pursuits and avocations of life, so we may be excused for passing the time in such trivial manœuvres as we can invent to excite the envy of our own, and triumph over the pride of the opposite, sex. But that a man should lower himself to act the part of a slave, tied to an apron-string, and voluntarily be a fool, without being an honest one—it is too degrading! Such a despicable being does us an infinity of harm; he encourages us to display all the worst points of the female character; he cheats us of our due amount of homage from many a noble heart, and perhaps robs us of our own dignity and self-respect. Yet, such is the creature we encourage in our blind vanity, and whilst we vote him so pleasant and agreeable, temper our commendation with the mild remonstrance, "though I am afraid he's rather a flirt!"

I saw the drawing-room on that morning was no place for me, so I folded my work, and curbing my tongue, which I own had a strong inclination to take its part in the war of words, I sought my own room, and found there, in addition to the

litter and discomfort inseparable from the process of packing, a letter just arrived by the post. It was in cousin Amelia's hand, and bore the Dangerfield post-mark. "What now?" I thought, dreading to open it lest it might contain some fresh object of annoyance, some further inquiries or remarks calculated to irritate my already over-driven temper out of due bounds. "Cousin Amelia never writes to me unless she has something unpleasant to say," was my mental observation, "and a very little more would fill the cup to over-flowing. Whatever happens, I am determined not to cry: rather than face all those ladies with red eyes when I go to wish Lady Scapegrace good-bye, I would forego the pleasure of ever receiving a letter or hearing a bit of news again!"

So I popped cousin Amelia's epistle into my pocket without breaking the seal, and put on my bonnet at once, that I might be ready to start, and not keep cousin John waiting. The leave-taking was got over more easily than I expected. People generally hustle one off in as great a hurry as the common decencies of society would admit of, in order to shorten as much as possible the unavoidable *gêne* of parting. Sir Guy, staunch to his colours, was to drive me back on the detested drag; but his great face fell several inches when I expressed my determination to perform the journey this time *inside*.

"I've bitted the team on purpose for you, Miss Kate," he exclaimed, with one of his usual oaths,

"and now you throw me over at the last moment. Too bad; by all that's disappointing, it's too bad! Come, now, think better of it, put on my box-coat, and catch hold of 'em, there's a good girl."

"Inside, or not at all, Sir Guy," was my answer; and I can be pretty determined, too, when I choose.

"Then perhaps your maid would like to come on the box," urged the Baronet, who seemed to have set his heart on the enjoyment of *some* female society.

"Gertrude goes with me," I replied stoutly; for I thought cousin John looked pleased, and Sir Guy was at a nonplus.

"Awfully high temper," he muttered, as he took his reins and placed his foot on the roller-bolt; "I like 'em saucy, I own, but this girl's a regular vixen!"

Sir Guy was very much put out, and vented his annoyance on his off-wheeler, double-thonging that unfortunate animal most unmercifully the whole way to the station. He bade me farewell with a coldness, and almost sulkiness, quite foreign to his usual demeanour, and infinitely pleasanter to my feelings. Besides, I saw plainly that the more I fell in the baronet's good opinion, the higher I rose in that of my chaperon; and by the time John and I were fairly settled in a *coupé*, my cousin had got back to his old, frank, cordial manner, and I took courage to break the seal of cousin Amelia's letter, and peruse that interesting

document, regardless of all the sarcasms and innuendoes it might probably contain.

What a jumble of incongruities it was! Long stories about the weather, and the garden, and the farm, and all sorts of things which, no one knew better than I did, had no interest for my correspondent whatever. I remarked, however, throughout the whole composition, that mamma's sentiments and regulations were treated with an unusual degree of contempt, and the writer's own opinions asserted with a boldness and freedom I had never before observed in my strait-laced, hypocritical cousin. Mr. Haycock's name, too, was very frequently brought on the *tapis* — he seemed to have breakfasted with them, lunched with them, walked, driven, played billiards with them, and, in short, to have taken up his residence almost entirely at Dangerfield. The postscript explained it all, and the postscript I give verbatim, as I read it aloud to cousin John whilst we were whizzing along at the rate of forty miles an hour.

"*P.S.*—I am sure my dear Kate will give me joy. You cannot have forgotten a *certain* person calling this autumn at Dangerfield for a *certain* purpose, in which he did not seem clearly to know his own mind. Everything is now explained. My dear Herod (is it not a pretty Christian name?)—my dear Herod is all that I can wish, and assures me that all along *it* was intended for me. The *happy day* is not yet fixed; but my dearest Kate may rest assured that I will not fail to give her the *earliest intelligence* on the *first opportunity*. Tell Mr. Jones I shall be married before him, after all."

The last sentence escaped my lips without my meaning it. Had I not come upon it unexpectedly,

I think I should have kept it to myself. John blushed, and looked hurt. For a few minutes there was a disagreeable silence, which we both felt awkward. He was the first to break it.

"Kate," said he, "do you think I shall be married before Miss Horsingham?"

"How can I tell?" I replied, looking steadfastly out of the window, whilst my colour rose and my heart beat rapidly.

"Do you believe that Welsh story, Kate?" proceeded my cousin.

I knew by his voice it couldn't be true; I felt it was a slander; and I whispered, "No."

"One more question, Kate," urged cousin John, in a thick, low voice: "why did you refuse Frank Lovell?"

"He never proposed to me," I answered; "I never gave him an opportunity."

"Why not?" said my cousin.

"Because I liked someone else better," was my reply; and I think those few words settled the whole business.

. . . . . .

I shall soon be five-and-twenty now, and on my birthday I am to be married. Aunt Deborah has got better ever since it has all been settled. Everybody seems pleased; and I am sure no one can be better pleased than I am. Only Lady Horsingham says, "Kate will *never* settle." I think I know better. I think I shall make none the worse a wife because I can walk, and ride, and get

up early, and stand all weathers, and love the simple, wholesome, natural pleasures of the country. John thinks so too, and that is all I need care about.

I have such a charming *trousseau*, though I am ashamed to say I take very little pleasure in looking at it. But kind, thoughtful cousin John has presented Brilliant with an entirely new set of clothing; and I think my horse seems almost more delighted with his finery than his mistress is with hers. My cousin and I ride together every day. Dear me! how delightful it is to think that I shall always be as happy as I am now!

THE END

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